

A HERO FOR REGIS

In *A Hero for Regis*, Jack Hoffenberg fulfills the literary promise of his first novel, *Sow Not In Anger*, with the tremendously gripping story of a young man from a small town who returns home a national hero, a winner of the Medal of Honour.

On the night of March 17th, 1945, during a patrol action, an event occurred that brought Luther Dorman America's highest military award, and launched him and the town of Regis into national prominence. But what *really* happened in the forest on that fateful night? And what happens when Luther, the selfish, cowardly weakling son of a tenant farmer returns home in the role of national hero, forced to bear the responsibilities as well as the penalties placed upon him by the coveted Medal of Honour?

In telling the story of Luther Dorman, Jack Hoffenberg lifts the lid from the town of Regis to reveal a corrupt and vicious society, peopled with men and women obsessed with class, power and sex. There is Marcus Radford, the ambitious, subtle, ruthless political power-hunter, and Bethann, his beautiful daughter. There is Ruth-Rachel Hagen, whose husband, Dale, was patrol leader in the action which won Luther his medal; Robbie Tilebin, the Negro youth who ran away from Chicago to look for his family in the South; HESSIE Loomis, the sadistic deputy sheriff whose bitter hatred invades the lives of everyone in the town.

A Hero for Regis paints a rich and vivid picture of people in all walks of life in an American Southern town. There is ruthless manipulation by those in power, violence and raw sadism tolerated by the police, gentle manners concealing cold hearts, and bitter relations between black and white, rich and poor. This is a spell-binding novel with a narrative power that wins its own medal in the acid test for compelling fiction—once you have begun reading, you cannot put it down.

By the same author
SOW NOT IN ANGER

A Hero For Regis

A Novel by

JACK HOFFENBERG

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*With sincerest affection this book
is dedicated
to Frank and Eva Warner
to Harry H. Hoffenberg
and as always,
to Mary Joel*

Chapter 1

1. March, 1945

When he came awake he didn't know whether it was day or night. He was vaguely aware of a commotion and bustle about him, one he could not understand except that it involved him as the central figure. He was being moved, lifted from one bed into another. His head felt smothered, as though swathed in soft, thick layers of material, like some kind of a gray film through which, at first, he could see only dim lights and moving figures. As his vision cleared, he saw the faces of a man and woman, another man, mustached, and now another face he could not distinguish as either man or woman.

His chest felt numb, encased in something firm, rigid—either bandages wrapped about him very tightly or a cast of some kind. He tried to determine if there was some feeling in his legs or feet, but they seemed to be far, far away from the rest of his body, too far to transmit feeling to or from his brain. When he tried to lift his hands, he could not.

Christ, he thought dully, where am I? What's happening to me?

One of the male faces looked down into his, saw his eyes were opened. He hesitated for a moment, then said something to the female face. Her lips moved and he saw them part, her white teeth glistening between them, the slight flare of her nostrils, eyes opened wider with awareness. There was a blonde frame about her face and an oval halo of white above it. Her lips were moving, but he could hear nothing above the rumbling in his ears. Other faces were looking down at him now, the one of unknown gender frowning, the others blandly serious. Only the blonde nurse was smiling.

He tried to move his lips. They were so dry, almost as parched as his throat, so that there was pain in the effort. The word "water" was formed by his lips, but he could not hear it and couldn't know whether he had spoken it or imagined that he had.

These were nurses and orderlies and doctors, he knew now. The blonde nurse spoke to him, and above the rustle of garments and

movements about him he could distinguish a few slurred words mingled with the buzzing and drumming in his ears, heard his name, *Luther Dorman*, spoken. Again he framed the word with his lips: "Water."

The rustling noises stopped. They had completed his transfer from one bed to the other, the latter somewhat narrower, and were strapping him down to it with canvas bands, tugging them tightly to hold him in place.

He could hear her voice now. "No water, Sergeant," she said with a soft, pleasant smile. "You're on your way now. We'll be moving you and in a little while you'll be good as new again."

"Thir-sty," he managed; then, "Dry."

"I'll fix that for you," she said. She turned away for a moment and his eyes tried unsuccessfully to follow her. She came back into his range of vision, holding a small wad of white gauze between her long fingers. He felt the wetness, the refreshing taste of the few drops of water it held. He tried, by compressing his lips, to squeeze the moisture out of the gauze into his mouth, but she had already removed it. For the moment he was satisfied, his tongue licking at his moistened lips.

The genderless face was at his left side now and he could see that it, too, belonged to a nurse, an older woman, crisply efficient and unsmiling. She lifted his arm out from under the restricting band of canvas and dabbed at it with an alcohol-soaked ball of cotton and he could feel the coldness of it as it touched him. He scarcely felt the prick of the needle as it was inserted into his arm swiftly with expert 'deftness. She withdrew it after a few seconds and he felt the cold cotton dabbing him again.

The blonde nurse was standing behind him, hands steadying the bed, and he knew now that he was on a stretcher on wheels, that they would be taking him into an operating theater to remove the bullets from his body.

"Everything okay now, Sergeant?" she asked lightly.

Twice now she had called him "Sergeant." He wanted to tell her she was mistaken in his rank, but the urge to talk or move or see what was going on about him was gone now, in some way related to the older nurse and the needle she had pushed into his arm.

The movement began. He was being wheeled along a wide corridor that seemed endless, a male orderly at either side ahead of him, the pretty nurse behind, pushing lightly. His eyelids were growing heavier now, but he managed to keep his eyes open just a little,

seeing the activity in the hallway through narrow slits. They passed a number of people, patients in wine-colored robes, doctors, nurses, orderlies. A throaty male voice said, "Good luck, soldier," as he was convoyed along.

He looked straight up again and saw the blonde nurse hovering over him. She smiled down on him and brushed a long, delicate hand lightly over his forehead. Her hand felt cool and he attempted a smile. His eyes closed again. It was easier now. The earlier tension was leaving him; everything was light and soft he felt as though they were all gliding, floating on air along the corridor.

They came to a stop and he opened his eyes only wide enough to see the closed double doors ahead, read the lettering that stretched across both doors: "Operating Theater No. 3." One of the orderlies pushed the doors open. The nurse and the other orderly guided the stretcher between them, inside to the center of the next room under the huge circle of light, beside the operating table. Others came to help lift him, move him from the rolling stretcher to the table. The stretcher was whisked away quickly and they were fastening the straps about him again. The pretty nurse was gone. Another took her place, face masked from the bridge of her nose to below her chin; a cap covered her head from an inch or two above her eyebrows upward. He could tell that, beneath her mask, she was smiling at him. It was in her eyes, that smile. Just like his sister's, they were. It was as though he were looking right into Carrie's eyes.

Oh, Carrie, he thought. I wish you were here with me now. I've got so much to tell you. If anything happens to me, if I die, no body'll ever know it. Maybe it'll be better that way. But I wish you were here with me, anyway.

There was more silent, efficient activity about him, more nurses, more doctors, a blur of green and white, objects being moved up beside the operating table, to the head of it above him. He looked up and saw the eyes again, Carrie's eyes, and he felt better, lighter, a kind of weightlessness about him, as though it didn't matter now what happened. He watched and saw her reach out for something, then felt the brush of a damp cloth over his face to wipe away the sweat.

He saw the black, cone-like object coming toward him, felt it as it covered his nose and mouth like a mask. He tried to roll his head away from under it, but it moved quickly with him, outwitting his attempted evasion as it clamped itself firmly down upon his face.

It all began to come back to him, with a sudden roaring, the

machine gun from its nest, the flames from the exploding tank. His eyes were closed tightly, yet he saw the leaping shadows in the flashes, the face again: first as he had known it so well at home in Regis; then grinning obscenely and dead in that black forest.

He tried to shake his head and thus drive the face from his mind. Slowly it all began to evaporate, the night, the shadowy figures, the gun flashes, the face. And now only the blackness remained; then suddenly, the other face came back to him again. Carrie's face. Or was it Bethann's?

2. June, 1940

Luther Dorman sat on the top rail of the weathered fence, one foot resting on the middle rail, the other on the ground, his eyes crinkled in the bright mid-June sunlight. He had been completing his morning chores when he looked up and caught a glimpse of horse and rider flashing downfield. At once he recognized the pair, Bethann Radford leaning forward over Shahzadi, the golden palomino Mr. Marcus had imported from Texas as a surprise gift for her homecoming.

Luther lit a cigarette, and waited for her to shorten the more than two hundred yards between them. He smiled with admiration for her beautiful form in the saddle, the inner-born liquidity of motion and rhythm that seemed to blend horse and rider into one. Or was it their almost identical coloring? I don't know what she learned up there in college, he said to himself reflectively, but she sure by God didn't forget how to ride.

He slouched indolently as he sat hatless in the sun. When he stood erect, he was over the six-foot mark by about an inch or two, lean, slim-waisted, well-muscled, and hardened by his young years of chores, planting, hoeing, fence-mending, and tending to the thousand-and-one never-ending jobs that were always waiting to be done about the place. He was bronzed deeply by the sun, his hair several shades lighter than his skin, and apart from a mouth that grinned in a lopsided slash, his facial features were straight and regular. He had well-spaced eyes and high cheekbones, small ears that lay close to his head. The deep cleft in his chin gave him some trouble while shaving, but at nineteen, this was no great problem in his life.

Bethann had closed the gap between them considerably in the last few moments as she came head-on toward him. Now his eyes followed her with complete approval. Her golden blonde hair had been cut boyishly short for the summer and she wore a pair of faded blue jeans, shrunk to an almost skintight fit by many washings. The light-

weight khaki shirt hugged her form closely and was equally faded, its sleeves rolled up high above her elbows.

Since childhood, she had had the figure and good looks that could only be described as durable and lasting. Time had matured her china-doll features and thick lashes into exquisite beauty. There was an air of the delicate about her, yet her lithe, supple body and athletic movement belied any such implied fragility. She walked and danced and ran and rode with a certain positive directness, as if every move had been well planned in advance.

Bethann had been home since Saturday morning, arriving on the 11:40 from Chancellor. This was the hot Monday morning following and Luther had roamed about searching for her those two whole days without success. His sister Carrie had mentioned fully ten days ago that the state university would begin summer holidays on Friday the fourteenth and that Miss Bethann would be home the following day, and although he had tried to act nonchalant about the news, inwardly he stirred with a mercurial excitement at the thought of seeing her again. She had left Regis early last September and this was the longest time in his memory that she had been gone from Radford Hall.

She began to pull back gently now, sitting up straighter in the saddle. The closer view of her was like a warm current circulating through him. Yes, she had grown during the past year, he noted; not much taller; slimmer, with certain feminine body accents more pronounced. Perhaps the word he sought was *matured*. But the bright smile was the same, the color of her hair and the same golden tint of her skin. He wondered if there would be any awkwardness between them, and then her right arm was flung upward in greeting as she cut left slightly and pulled up beside him.

"Hi, Luther!" she called.

"Hi, Miss Bethann," he replied with his broad flash of smile. "Glad to see you home again."

She tugged lightly at the reins to hold the capering mare back. "Thanks. It's nice to be home again. Daddy told me you've been working Princess for me so she'd be ready when I got home. Thanks for that, too. She's wonderful, isn't she?"

Luther put up a hand for the mare to nuzzle into. "She's a right fine animal," he admitted laconically. "Papers sent along with her say her name's Shahzadi."

Bethann ran a slim hand along the mare's neck, rubbed it gently. "That was until Daddy told me she was mine. I like the American version better. Princess. It fits her beautifully."

"How'd you like it up in Chancellor?"

"Just fine. I had a good year up there. Except that I missed the Hall so much."

"You make the top ten in your class?"

She laughed in that sudden, electric way he remembered so well. "Well, not exactly. Top thirty in a class of thirty-five would be more like it. How were things here while I've been gone?"

He shrugged his head backward to take in the land and cottage behind him. "Not much difference, one year from the next," he said. "But no more for me. I'm getting out of this."

"What do you mean? What are you going to do, Luther?"

"I don't know exactly, but I'm not going to fight this worn-out old patch of ground any more. I'm going to get me a job. A real, honest-to-God paying job."

"Have you talked to Daddy about it? He—"

Luther cut across her words at that point. "No, Miss Bethann," he said curtly. "When I get a job, I'll get it on my own. We Dormans been taking enough charity from your daddy. It's about time I took over."

For a moment she was silent, taken slightly aback by the tinge of anger that had crept into his voice. Then, "How is your father?" she asked.

His mouth twisted between grimace and smile. "Jud? He's just about the same. Just like this place, he never changes." Now the bitterness could not be disguised or withheld. "He's still drunk most of the time. Drunk and living in the past."

"His back is no better?"

Luther laughed wryly. "His back? Nope. It's no better. And it won't ever get any better."

"You're not being fair, Luther. It was a serious fall he had, wasn't it?"

With measured patience he replied, "Miss Bethann, that was back in 1927, thirteen years ago when he fell off the roof at the Hall. After Mr. Marcus supported us while he was in the hospital and on crutches for over a year, he got so used to it he never could work again. Then he found out that corn whiskey was a lot cheaper and tasted a lot better than medicine, so he never drew a sober breath after that."

"Luther, you know it wasn't exactly like that. He—"

"Listen, Miss Bethann—" he began, but she interrupted with sudden exasperation.

"What's all this *Miss Bethann* about, Luther?" she asked, feeling

the new strangeness in him, as though the old childhood closeness had slipped away.

His face crimsoned. "Listen, Miss Bethann," he repeated with deliberate emphasis, "you know as well as I do that his bad luck was just an excuse to live off your daddy's charity. It killed my mother and then he took me out of school after the eighth grade and put me to work on the place. And I been chained to it ever since. But I'm through now, by God, and I'm getting out. And I can't go to Mr. Marcus for a job because he won't like me going off the land like this."

His voice dropped and he looked off past Bethann toward the Radford mansion on the slight rise in the distance. He couldn't bring himself to remind her that it was only last summer that Marcus Radford had let him know, through his sister Carrie, that he would no longer be required to help Robbie Tilebin, the colored handyman at the Hall; and he knew this was Mr. Marcus's way of telling him he wasn't wanted around the place, nor around Bethann. Again, only recently, after he worked Shahzadi because Robbie couldn't ride, Marcus had sent him a gift, a beautiful *cairne* rifle, by Carrie, and Carrie again told him—no, *warned* him—that Miss Bethann would be coming home and that it would be better if he weren't around. . . .

He said, "No. Mr. Marcus'd blow up and run me out of Regis County if I told him I was going off the land."

In a shocked voice she exclaimed, "Luther, you know that's not so. You know Daddy wouldn't do a thing like that to you."

"No? Haven't you been home long enough to know that I don't do any maintenance work up at the Hall? That Robbie was told to do it all by himself? I guess even your daddy figures a nigger is better and safer to have around than poor white trash," he added with deliberate malice.

For a moment she sat in silence. Luther reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a package of cigarettes, offered her one. She refused it, waited until he had lighted his, then said, "Is this the way it's going to be, Luther? You and Daddy feuding like this?"

His mouth curved in a wintry smile. "Shoot, you must be funnin', Miss Bethann. Me feud with the richest man in Regis County, owner of the bank, one of the biggest men in state politics and God-only-knows what else?"

"All right, Luther," she said with an air of finality, "if you want to sit there and feel sorry for yourself, go ahead. But I don't have to sit here and listen to it."

"No, you sure don't. No, ma'am." He jumped off the fence, picked up the pail, and began walking swiftly toward the small barn. A few angry tears leaped into Bethann's eyes as she wheeled Shahzadi sharply to the right and rode off toward the creek.

Next to her own room, Marcus's study was Bethann's favorite in the big house. Its paneled walls, the thick, rich carpeting, massive desk, tall lamps, and leather-covered furniture gave her a feeling of solid, secure comfort. As a child it had been her choice of rooms in which to play when the weather outside was bad. She could recall so many pleasant hours in front of the fireplace, Newton feeding thick logs of hard cypress and oak to the flames behind the protective brass screen as she leafed through pages of storybooks or played with her dolls and other toys.

They sat in the study now, the supper hour long past, Marcus in his favorite leather chair reading the local *Regis Herald*, a copy of the Chancellor *Examiner* folded neatly on the small table beside him. Bethann, changed into a simple dress that revealed more of the woman than the young girl who had left here almost ten months ago, sat at Marcus's desk writing notes to college friends, looking up occasionally to peer at her father, so deeply engrossed in his reading. Marcus, she noted, had changed considerably in the time she had been away. He had grown a bit heavier and a second chin was more in evidence when his head leaned forward to read. There was considerably more gray peppered through his hair than she remembered before, but this seemed not to age him so much as it lent a distinguishing touch. He is still a very attractive man, she thought with some small pride.

She put down the pen, pushed the sheet of stationery to one side. There was an almost compelling urge in her to go to Marcus, to curl up in his lap and fling her arms around him, feel the tightness of his grasp. It had been that way with them once, so long ago that she could hardly remember, and she knew that nothing else she could give him would mean as much to him as this sign of affection from her. And yet, she could not make the move toward him. Something held her back, choked back her feeling for him—like a shadow, yet with substance strong enough to prevent her from piercing it, to reach out and demonstrate her feelings for him.

In the year Bethann had been at Chancellor, she had often thought it would be better when she would see him after some time had elapsed, that she would be able to step into his arms for a true,

fatherly kiss and embrace; that she would walk and dine with him, talk, discuss, plan. . . . But it hadn't worked out. He had come to the state capital several times on political matters during that year. He had called her eagerly, asking her to dinner at the Randolph Hotel where he always stayed. That first time, as she crossed the lobby to where he was standing with the governor and two other men, he had looked up and seen her and his face had brightened, suddenly animated by the sight of her. He came to meet her, put his arm around her. She kissed the cheek he offered and took his own kiss in return. Then he introduced her to the governor and the other men. After a few moments the others shook hands and left them in the lobby, and Marcus guided her into the stately dining room where they had their dinner. He told her a few of the happenings at home, the local news, and she told him how well she was getting along at the university. He told her he was planning to send her abroad that summer and she asked him not to make the plans too definite, that she was already homesick for the Hall and might rather spend her summer vacation there; and this had sent a noticeable surge of happiness through him. Yet, somehow, she couldn't bring herself to tell him certain things that should have been of great interest to him as they were to her, matters that touched only themselves. Later, perhaps tomorrow, she might have an opportunity to tell him of her new friends—and one in particular, Garrett Harwick.

"Do you see much of Otis Markland's boy, Ross?" Marcus asked.

"Of course. Ross and I are great friends. We have several classes together and he keeps me posted on some of the things that are going on in Regis."

"He's a fine boy. I like Ross."

"I do, too."

She thought that now she might be able to inject Garrett's name into the conversation, but the waiter had chosen that very moment to bring the check, which Marcus signed and rose to his feet, so that she had to get up, too. They had gone to the suite on the top floor of the hotel that he maintained the year around and some of the earlier formality returned. He asked her if she had enough money, if there was anything else she might want or need; but his allowance to her had been more than ample and there was nothing she wanted or needed in a material way; and she thought of saying, "If I could have a little time to tell you what is close to my heart," but she knew she couldn't utter the words.

The phone rang then and Marcus answered it. He listened for a few moments, spoke briefly, and then excused himself, saying that

he must meet Peter Farrington, the state party leader, in the lobby for a few minutes. Rather than accompany him and wait in the lobby, she remained in the suite and in boredom examined the other rooms: kitchen, small dining room, bedroom, and bath. In the bedroom she touched the personal things that belonged to him, his hairbrushes and razor. She picked up his robe that lay across a chair and carried it to the closet to hang up.

And then she had opened the closet door and saw the half-dozen suits hanging from the hanger rod—and from a hook in the wall the sheer nightgown and negligee that hung next to his pajamas, a pair of flossy bedroom slippers beside his on the floor; and now she noticed the other signs of feminine co-occupancy there. She closed the door with a feeling of angry dullness and went back to the living room. Marcus returned in another fifteen minutes and asked what he could do to entertain her, but she pleaded a severe headache. He saw her back to the sorority house where she lived, and when he called again the next day, she pleaded pressure of study and would not see him.

After that, she never met him alone. On the occasions when he came to Chancellor and telephoned her, she would have dinner with him, but would bring along a sorority friend each time. All thoughts of discussing Garrett Harwick with him had flown.

Home for her vacation, it was Newton who had met her at the train. "Mist' Marcus, he at a 'portant meetin' at his office," the old Negro had told her apologetically. At suppertime (it was always "supper" in Regis, she thought, "dinner" in Chancellor) he came home, rushed to kiss her lightly, then went upstairs to shave and change. After supper he asked if there was anything she would like to do, perhaps have some of her old friends in for the evening.

"No, Daddy, thank you," she had replied. "I've had a big day and I'm tired. I think I'd rather go to bed early, if you don't mind."

Sitting in the study with him now, watching the curl of smoke from his cigar as it spiraled lazily upward, she wondered if Garrett had been right. He had been so right about so many other things, and yet this feeling that she had about Marcus was so—close—so personal—that it surprised her to be able to talk about it to Garrett at all. But he had been so *impersonal* about it, almost clinically so, that it had been as easy to discuss this as other, less important, subjects.

"It sounds like old-fashioned guilt to me, Beth. Guilt on your part

and some on his. Unless you can talk it out, you'll never get over it."

"But he's so—he feels his convictions so strongly, Gar. I remember how he used to joke with the people he dealt with in business or politics when they would come to the house to see him. He would laugh and joke with them, but there was something deadly serious when he would say, 'Look, Sam, I'm the easiest man in the world to get along with. All you have to do is see things as I see them and let me have my own way. You do that and we'll get along just fine.' In other matters, he's so wonderful, but with a subject that's so deep, so personal, I just can't begin to bring it up. He's so headstrong and steel-willed."

"Are you trying to say 'unreasonably stubborn'?" Garrett asked with a light laugh.

"In some cases that would be a near-perfect description," she agreed.

"But not, I take it, where you are personally concerned."

She hesitated, then replied, "I don't honestly know, Gar. We've never had a real clash of wills that I can remember. I know he loves me deeply and I love him, I'm sure, but there's been no real test—or contest—between us."

Garrett shook his head. "I'm no psychologist, honey," he said. "Just a poor would-be author with a teaching certificate to keep me from starving to death while I try to write. This is a little too complicated for my meager experience or knowledge. How about a—?"

She laughed and dismissed his unspoken suggestion. "A professional psychologist or psychiatrist? No, thanks. I can't even imagine how I got on the subject with you."

"Maybe it's because I'm so much older than you, the fatherly confessor-type," he joked.

The matter was left there. But she knew it all had to do with her mother, Martha-Louise. And it would come back to her on the same kind of a windy, stormy night when the sounds of heavy rain beating against the house like a multitude of tiny, angry fists would waken her; and she would lie in bed, whimpering, terrified, seeming to return to that night when she was five and once again Martha-Louise lay struggling against death, trying to fight it off even as she cursed Marcus Radford with her last breath.

Bethann shook her head now as if to clear her mind of this unwelcome thought, again feeling a sense of guilt or disloyalty. Marcus had turned a page of his paper, calling attention to himself briefly. She began to wonder about the dreams again. Not once in the ten

months she had spent in Chancellor had she had one, no matter how wild or stormy the night.

Would they come back with her return to the Hall?

She knew also that her mother's tragic death was somehow related to the shocking event of her Grandfather Hadley Vincent's suicide. This knowledge had come to her later, when she was eight or nine, when the local gossips had twisted and tangled the names of Marcus and Martha-Louise Radford into every kind of spiteful vileness that would make fine listening, even finer telling. It had begun at school, and when the whispers became general, she had had the sympathy and comfort of her teachers. A few of her young schoolmates had stood loyally at her side, and there were Ross Markland and Luther Dorman, always ready to fend off the others who had made her a target for the special cruelty at which only the young can be so piercingly and hatefully adept. In her own defense, Bethann had struck back in every way she could, matching invective and physical force and other displays of childish vindictiveness. And then one day she became engaged in a two-fisted knock-down brawl with Janet Cameron and, before Luther or Ross could come to her aid, had clawed Janet's face into a mass of bleeding furrows and nearly stripped the clothes from her.

Mr. Denton, the school principal, called on Marcus at the bank later that same day. After a quiet talk Bethann was taken out of school and until 1935, when she was fourteen and ready for high school, was given over to George Maxon, a retired teacher, who came to the Hall each weekday to tutor her.

For months she refused to go into Regis. Her world became narrowed down to the few persons around her: Sudie and Newton, the Negro couple who were housekeeper and butler at the Hall; Carrie Dorman, Luther's older sister who was a houseworker at the Hall; Luther, who was her own age, and the others who worked at miscellaneous jobs around the place. She hardly counted Mr. Maxon, the aging, brittle, unsmiling tutor; just as she had begun not to count Marcus, who, in her young mind, she identified as the cause of the sudden and violent change in her life.

It was Marcus who encouraged Carrie to spend more of her time with Bethann, to bring Luther to the Hall after school and on Saturdays and Sundays in order to give her the companionship of someone her own age, more so because the two got along so well; and in time Carrie was able to get back to her housework without having to pay too much attention to either.

When she was fourteen, Bethann agreed willingly to enter Regis High, even though she was filled with apprehension, knowing that she might be stepping back into the same kind of situation that had forced her to be taken from elementary school.

"Are you going to like going to high school, Luther?" she asked.

"Sure, I guess so. If I get to go. You'll like it, Bethann. It's going to be a lot more fun than elementary."

"Who else is going from your class?"

"Oh, most everybody. A few won't be going on, but Beanie Davis, Chad Borden, and Ross Markland and the rest, they're all going."

"And Della Borden and Elizabeth Pike and Janet Cameron?"

He knew then what was bothering her, though she was unwilling to bring it out into the open. "Shoot," he said disarmingly, "you don't have to worry about that. That was just a lot of dumb kid talk. Nobody's mentioned it for a long time. You'll see."

It was fun to get back to school with Della and Elizabeth and Chad and Ross. Janet Cameron regarded Bethann balefully from afar, kept a safe, respectful distance. Now she could make up for much she had missed before, becoming a part of the group that seemed always to center around Ross Markland and Della Borden, already known as "steadies." Still, Bethann felt the need of reassurance and she insisted that Newton stop by the Dorman place to pick up Luther and save him the ride to town on the bus. Luther was embarrassed to be chauffeured to school and at first squirmed at the jeering and catcalls that greeted him. Its one strong effect, however, lay in the fact that anyone who had any ideas about taunting Bethann Radford now knew that they would have to deal with Luther Dorman; and Luther was a good head taller than most of the boys, and much stronger.

For Luther, unhappily, high school lasted only until Thanksgiving that year, when Jud Dorman took to his bed and refused, or was unable, he insisted, to get up and pursue the labors of the land and the attendant chores. And so in his fifteenth year Luther took over the operation of the small farm while Carrie, eight years his senior, continued to work at the Hall. For a while through that fall and winter Bethann, Della Borden, and Ross Markland came seeking him out, and he would sneak away into town with them for a movie or a soda, perhaps to dance to the jukebox music in the back room of Stephenson's Milk Bar.

And then it happened—the small-town underhanded meanness that began to couple Bethann's name with Luther's in behind-the-hand gossip. In time it moved from schoolyard and town into the

home and was thus spread about until it reached Marcus Radford's ears; and although he did not believe a word of the scurrilous bits that were passed on to him, he knew it was time to put an end to the cause of it. He spoke to Carrie Dorman about it.

"I'm sure you understand, Carrie," he said kindly, "that I don't for a moment believe this nasty, venal gossip, but we both know that it can do a lot of damage to Bethann *and* Luther. For the sake of both, I think it would be best if Luther confined himself to—What I'm trying to say, Carrie, and not very well, is that someday Bethann will become a wealthy young woman and go out into a world that is so different and far removed from Luther's. Later on he will be hurt even more deeply than—"

Carrie said through pursed lips, "I understand, Mr. Marcus. I'll have a talk with him. I wish I—I—"

"You wish what, Carrie?"

"Nothing, Mr. Marcus. I know it's best for—both of them I'll talk to him tonight."

"Thank you, Carrie. I knew you would understand."

That, when he was fifteen, was the first time Luther had been told he must stay close to home and away from the Hall and Miss Bethann. It was a bad period in his life. He had taken it with the deep hurt of its full implication; it turned him sullen and angry. Nothing had been said to Bethann, so now, whenever she came by to ask him to ride or to go for a swim in the creek with her and the others, he either hid or begged off.

Carrie was fully aware of his cold resentment toward Mr. Marcus, afraid that some of it was directed to herself. She worried over his withdrawal from everything and everyone—even herself. He refused to take the money from her to go into town for an occasional movie and would sit silently through a meal, keep to himself afterward. His behavior was noticeable even to Jud, now a man of much leisure, who would taunt him to the point where Luther would simply get up and walk out of the house to be free of him.

"Sooner you get them biggety notions outen yore head," Jud grumbled, "the better off you goin' a be. You ain't no blooded stock an' you just better remember yore place, else I'll take a stick to yore backside. You hear me, boy?"

Carrie's efforts to placate Luther were wasted, even as were Jud's threats. She tried often to talk with him about it, tried to minimize its importance, but he would stare out coldly and say, "What's all the fuss about, Car? I don't care. I don't care one damn bit. Not for

a single minute, you hear?" And the flushed anger and high pitch of his voice told her all she need know—how much it really did matter to him.

And so the lonely, angry months passed . . . another year . . . still another . . .

There came a hot May afternoon, a Saturday, when Bethann came to the creek where he was swimming alone. She climbed off her pony, slipped out of her riding pants and shirt, kicked off her shoes, and stood exposed in the bathing suit she wore underneath. She took a deep breath and leaped into the water with a resounding splash, coming up with a loud, "It's *free-ee-ee-zing!*" Without a word, Luther made for the shore and climbed out. She followed him up the bank, toweling herself just as he was doing.

"Are you going to tell me what the matter is, Luther?" she asked.

He wouldn't turn around to face her, rubbing himself briskly with the rough towel. "You better go ask your daddy," he said curtly

"What has Daddy got to do with it?" she asked.

"He can tell you that a lot better'n I can."

"I thought we were friends, Luther," she appealed. "You promised when we started high school that we would be friends."

He stopped toweling himself and turned to her. "Listen, Miss Bethann," he said in steely tones, "high school's been over for me for a long time. Your father don't want you hanging around with poor white trash and he don't want no poor white trash hanging around his daughter. Now why don't you go on home so I can get dressed? I got things to do. I'm going to the show in town tonight."

"Take me with you, Luther, please," she asked.

He shook his head, lips pressed firmly together. "No. Your father'd raise hell, Miss Bethann, and you—"

She said sharply, "You stop calling me 'Miss' as if you were a colored field hand, Luther."

He ignored that. "The way I hear it is that you're going to be getting ready for college someday soon and after that you'll be getting married and your father wants to make damn sure nobody suspects that you include me as one of your friends. That could just about kill your chances socially. Now you take—"

"Luther," she said with youthful fire in her voice, "are you going to stand there and treat me as though I were a child without good sense? You and I've known each other ever since we crawled and walked together. When my—mother—died, your sister took care of me like she was my own mother. We're both seventeen now and

if I can't decide who I want for my own friends, then what's the use—what's the use—?" She began to cry softly and Luther dropped his towel and went to comfort her.

"I'm sorry, Bethann," he said. "I oughtn't to take it out on you because I'm sore at your father telling Carrie I ought to stay away from the Hall. I know he's right, though. It's just that I don't like to be told off that I'm poor white trash."

"Oh, Luther, I don't care what Daddy said to Carrie. I wish—I could just run away from the Hall. Everything that used to be so wonderful to me looks so wrong now. I don't even know how to explain it."

"Don't talk like that, Bethann. You couldn't leave the Hall. It's your home, the only one you ever knew."

"Sometimes I hate it."

"He's your father and you're only seventeen. You can't run away from him."

"Why can't I? Just why not?"

"You know you're only just talking. He could bring you back in no time because you're under age. He could even put you in a public institution if he wanted. That wouldn't be much fun, would it?"

"Why is he so afraid of you coming to the Hall or us riding or swimming or going to a movie with the others?"

"Bethann, you know what he's afraid of."

"What?"

"Of you and me, that's what."

"You and me *what*, for heaven's sake?"

"You know well enough without me telling you. You're just trying to make me say it."

"You can say it to me, can't you, Luther? Or do you think like Daddy, that I'm a small, stupid child? I'm not and you know it."

"Then you ought to know what I'm talking about without me having to say it right out."

When she said it the words were forthright and without a hint of slyness and they stung him into anger that he had been so careless. "Just because you come down here some nights to go swimming with Cressie Jackson—" she began.

His head snapped around quickly, angrily. "What?" he spat out. "What the devil did you say?"

"Well, you do, don't you?"

"How come you say a thing like that?" he demanded heatedly.

"Don't worry, Luther, I haven't told anybody else."

"Wh—how—?"

She laughed lightly, secure for the moment in her superior knowledge. "One night when I wanted to come down here for a swim to cool off, Sudie told me I shouldn't, that sometimes you and other boys come down nights and swim around naked as jaybirds."

"You believe that old—" he began.

"Don't you dare say anything about Sudie, Luther. And, besides, she was right," Bethann added defiantly.

"Just because she said—"

"No. Not because she *said*. Because I sneaked down alone one night. I heard the splashing and voices and I saw you and Cressie—I—"

Silently, Luther picked up his shirt and shrugged into it, buttoning it furiously, then pulled his khaki trousers up over his wet swim trunks. "You better go along now, Bethann," he said quietly. "Now you know I been here with a colored girl, I guess you ought to know what your father means, don't you?"

"You're not the only white boy ever had a colored girl, are you?"

"Bethann, you better go on home."

"Luther?"

"What?" He snapped the word out with angry impatience and embarrassment.

"Do you come down here often with Cressie?"

He crimsoned deeper. "Listen, Missy, you better stop talking and get out of here. Your father finds out—"

"Maybe I'll tell him I went swimming with you today," she said with a flippant smile.

"Okay, go ahead. If you want to get me in trouble, just you go ahead."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Bethann, for Pete's sake, don't be so dumb. You tell him that and he'll come after me like he was after a hog with a skinning knife. I been warned to stay away from you. Marcus Radford don't warn people more than once. Don't you know that?"

She said with some remorse, "I wouldn't do anything to hurt you, Luther. Don't you know that?"

"Then go on home, will you? Your father said—"

"My father says. My father says. Don't keep telling me what my father says. And you might as well know right now that I'm going to do anything I please and with whom I please. So there."

"You better watch your tongue, Missy. You'll be borrowing yourself a peck of trouble talking biggety like that."

"Oh, pooh. And a great big double pooh. Luther?"

"What?" He had buckled the belt around his waist and sat down on the grass now to pull on his socks and shoes.

"Did you ever—" her voice stumbled for a word she could use here—"make time with Ruth-Rachel Pierce?"

He turned toward her angrily, understanding her meaning clearly, spitting the words out at her. "No, I never went out with Ruth-Rachel and I never made any *time* with her, either."

"She—she—"

"Listen, Bethann, don't you be like those wiseacres at school, those big flapping mouths who know everything about everybody. I thought you had more sense than to—"

"Well, all the girls say she does. I guess the boys talk about it, too."

"Well, if she does, that's her business and none of yours or mine." He began tying the laces on his heavy work shoes. Bethann came over and sat down beside him.

"Luther," she said, "I didn't mean to be nasty about Ruth-Rachel Pierce. And I'm sorry I told you I know about you and Cressie."

He looked up at her quickly, then turned back to tie the last lace.

"Luther, do you like me?" she asked suddenly.

"You know, I think your daddy's right. From now on—"

She had her arms around him and her mouth was upon his. He pulled away from her for a moment and the cool freshness of her kiss lingered on his lips, in his mind. His arms curled around her and he held her tightly. "Bethann," he whispered, "we can sure get into a hell of a lot of trouble like this. Anybody catches us, your daddy'd wear us both thinner than a piece of tissue paper."

"Are you afraid, Luther?"

"I sure as hell am," he admitted, pulling back so that her arms dropped away from him.

She sighed. "Why is it," she asked, "that only boys are supposed to know all about the important things in life and girls aren't supposed to know anything until after they're married? And some don't even learn then."

"Well, not all of them wait that long," Luther said.

"Like Cressie Jackson? And Ruth-Rachel Pierce?"

Again angrily, "I don't know anything about Ruth-Rachel Pierce, I told you."

Her tone matched his now. "All right," she snapped, "then maybe I'm doing you a favor by telling you. She does. She does it whether you know it or not."

"And how would you know that, Miss Know-it-all?" he demanded.

"I can't tell you how I know it."

"Then I don't believe any of it. Not a single word."

"All right then, Mr. Smart, I'll tell you. Chad Borden's father whaled the daylights out of him for doing it with her one night last month. A sheriff's deputy caught the two of them out on the old County shell road in the back of Mr. Borden's car and took Chad home to his father. Ruth-Rachel was warned by the sheriff and let loose. Della Borden told me all about it. The whole thing was kept quiet because Mr. Borden told the deputy how sick Mrs. Borden has been. That's how I know it."

Luther stood up. "I've got to get home. If Carrie comes looking for me and finds us here like this—"

"She won't tell Daddy."

"You're damn well right she won't. Because she's not going to find us here."

He turned without another glance at her, walked up the short rise and leaped across the low fence, then began running swiftly toward his house.

4.

What, she wondered now as she studied Marcus from behind his own desk, would happen if he knew how much in love I am with Garrett? Is this why I'm afraid to talk with him—because I might let it slip out that I'm plotting to get him to move to Regis and take a teaching job? And that I'm not going back to Chancellor so I can be here with him? If we could only talk about the *important* things, the things that really matter. He's so—rigid. She shook her head, unable to cope with this feeling of ambivalence within her.

She thought now of how she had first met Garrett. She was crossing the quadrangle after her last class that day, on her way to meet Ross Markland and another couple at the Friday pre-game football rally, when he stopped her to ask directions for finding the Science Building.

"You're standing almost directly in front of it," she replied, pointing to it.

Without taking his eyes off her he said, "I know, but I had the most urgent need to speak to you and couldn't find anything else to say on the spur of the moment."

That had been the start of it. Very quickly they had become friends. He was doing his postgraduate work then and, through common interests, had become a close friend of Ross. Before a month had passed, she knew she had fallen deeply in love with him.

Well into spring, they began to discuss summer vacations, and it was then that Garrett, his postgraduate work coming to an end in June, would not be returning to Chancellor. He was considering two teaching jobs that might be available to him within the school system in Boston; had, in fact, sent applications to several other schools in New York and Pennsylvania. At once she and Ross began to urge him to come to Regis. The more they discussed the proposition, the more the plan seemed logical to Garrett, if he could teach and find the time to work on his book. Now she picked up the letter she was writing and re-read it.

DEAR GARRETT: (she read)

In the few days we've been home, Ross and I have already looked into the matter of an appointment for you here and there are at least *three* vacancies you could fill. Ross's father, as you know, is a member of the School Board and I'm sure that I can exercise my wiles on our Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Thad Clark, on your behalf—if you will fill out the application Ross is sending you and return it to him. If you do this at once, I am sure you can count on beginning to teach here with the coming fall term. Also, you would have time to get settled and to start on the final draft of your book. Please let me know when you return the application so I will be able to tell my father that I do not intend to return to the university, that I want to remain in Regis and *do something worthwhile* (like helping a struggling young author type his horrible, handwritten and misspelled—did I spell that correctly?—manuscript into something neat, beautiful, and acceptable).

You *will* write soon, won't you, darling?

All my love to you,
BETHANN

Marcus looked up from his paper and watched for a moment as Bethann's head bobbed up and down, using this as a means of emphasis in her writing. He remembered with a certain delight this childish trait from her earlier schooldays when she labored over her homework, and now the memory of the younger Bethann flooded him with pleasure.

Marcus Radford was a tall, liberally framed man who moved with the ease and grace of a well-coordinated athlete, yet he had never been athletically inclined in his youth. The drive and energy he ex-

pended in his daily work was almost enough to burn the excess fat from him; hunting, fishing, and riding, his only forms of diversion and exercise, took care of the rest.

Years before, in an effort to hide his extreme youth while engaged in the adult occupation of politicking through the state, he had adopted a pair of heavy, black-rimmed, wide-templed glasses, although his intimates knew they were for effect only. He used them as one would use a weapon: to point out a direction, emphasize a point, to remove from and replace them in his jacket pocket in a way that gained valuable seconds for him when called upon to make a sudden decision.

His hair was streaked at the temples and once he had sought, in vanity, to point this out to his barber, hoping the barber would take the initiative to touch them out; but the barber had remained mute and Marcus could not bring himself to ask that it be done. Now he no longer thought of it, would not permit a barber to remove this distinguishing feature.

In his early fifties, Marcus was physically strong and mentally alert, with an extraordinary capacity for organization, whether the problem was one that dealt with his bank, land, or his lofty position in county and state politics. He loved to boast that there were no "machine politics" in his state, but there were those who would have to admit that any such machine would be labeled: MARCUS RADFORD. Generally, he was spoken of as the Man Who Had Everything; and yet here in his study, his most prized possession was miles apart from him, even though she sat within a dozen feet of his chair.

He sighed at the sight of Bethann's maturing loveliness and wished he could sit and talk with her as easily as other parents talked with their daughters, examined their thoughts and plans, their likes and dislikes, aiding them, become a part of them. He wondered what it was that stood between them like a filmy, yet steel-like curtain, an invisible wall. And as always when he thought of her in this way, Martha-Louise would come back into his mind as she had been on that last night of her life, lying upon her bed in agonizing suffering.

"—and you're going to lose more than a son tonight, Marcus Radford," she had cried out. *You're going to lose your daughter as well one day! If I'm dying, let my dying curse be on your evil head and heart and soul!*" And so she had taken her revenge, destroying his unborn son in her own suicidal way.

The memory of her curse lay heavily upon him. Perhaps she hadn't meant that he would lose Bethann in a physical sense, but

like this, with this—strangeness—between them, awkwardness instead of love, misunderstanding in place of closeness and warmth and affection. His gifts to Bethann had been endless, sparing no expense to give her what he thought she would like. And she had kissed him for each gift, not lovingly, but dutifully; or perhaps as she would peck the cheek of a school friend. Hell, she'd kissed Carrie Dorman as though they were long-lost sisters, hugged Sudie with such genuine warmth on her return from the university that he had actually envied the old Negress.

One evening in Chancellor shortly after Bethann's arrival the previous September, Tracy Englander had said, "You know, Marc, your daughter is becoming more of a rival to me than any other woman could ever be."

Marcus had laughed at this and replied, "I wish you were right."

"And I wish things were better between you, Marc. What is it? Is there anything I can do?"

"It's nothing," he had lied; and then, to get her off the subject, "I'm meeting her downstairs for dinner in an hour. Why don't you join us, Tracy? We'll run across you in the lobby, 'by accident,' of course. I'll introduce you as a local newspaperwoman and invite you to dine with us. Later, I'll drive her back to the university and come back and meet you here in the suite."

Tracy said, "You can't possibly think so little of your own daughter's intelligence, can you, Marc?"

"Why should she suspect anything at all? You might even flash your press card. I don't see why it should make any difference if we have dinner with a newspaperman or newspaperwoman, do you?"

Tracy smiled. "Marc, how can you be so brilliant about so many other things and so—immature—about women—even women as young as your daughter? No, Marc, we females have a certain kind of built-in feeling about 'other' women that is stronger even than our alleged intuition about ordinary things. Instead, I'll go down to the lobby before you and watch as you meet her there. Make sure you guide her past me so that I can see her face. At this moment I only want to know what she looks like."

And later she said to Marcus with genuine sadness in her voice, "I feel very sorry, Marc. She's so lovely—so exquisite—and could give you so much. I hate to think that you and she are so very far apart. She's a darling girl and I'm almost sorry I turned your dinner offer down."

In a sudden burst of sheer honesty Marcus exclaimed, "I only wish to God *you* were her mother!"

The sudden explosiveness of his words brought quick, uncontrolled tears to Tracy's eyes. She gripped his hand tightly and wished silently that his wish could be true, but for her there were so many complications.

Why hadn't he forced the issue of marriage between them, he wondered. If he and Tracy had married a year or two after Martha-Louise's death, when Bethann was a mere child, the situation would be far different now, Marcus thought ruefully. Tracy was so wise about many things. She would have known how to cope with the problem.

He had known Tracy for an entire year before Martha-Louise died. Afterward, they had been too busy with their separate careers even to consider marriage. Bethann seemed to be growing up well in the care of Carrie Dorman and Sudie and there was so little time for the many things that needed to be done; so little time for Marcus in the world of politics; so little time for Tracy with the newspaper. And there was so much for Tracy to give up in a city like Chancellor in order to move to a small county seat like Regis where, as Mrs. Marcus Audrey Radford, she could hardly have engaged in her professional pursuits dealing with newspapers and political rigmarole. And there was Tom Englander, her aging father, who had come to accept her as the important political reporter and editorial writer she had become.

6.

Tracy Englander.

What a difference the passing years had made. To both of them. When he remembered her as she had been then, fourteen years ago in 1926 when she was twenty-four years old and only just beginning to learn that the undersurface of public office and political life was a rare, exciting, and broader world that most people knew so little about, he was amused to think they had ever got beyond the first real exchange of names. He had been struck by a sense of daring in her, a need to question and examine every side of a statement before accepting it as a firm opinion or conviction. Intrigued by her tenacious will to learn, to assess the value, intentions, and true meaning of the words of these men who were the lawmakers of the state, Marcus took a special delight in furthering her political education.

Almost at once, under Marcus's tutelage, she became conscious

of the fact that a woman should be feminine, use femininity as a weapon or a key, instead of trying to compete in this world of men, looking like a crumpled sheet of newsprint with a pound or two of printer's ink for blood.

Their first meeting was, in a way, curious enough. He had seen her several times at meetings to which the press had been invited. She had come to those meetings with Rufe Delman, political reporter for the Chancellor *Examiner*, and Rufe, whom Marcus had known for many years, had left her on the outer fringes with the other reporters while he pressed closer to Marcus for a handshake and exchange of friendly words. It had even annoyed Marcus that she was present, the only female among these world-wise, cynical men who could match wits with the best of them. It had particularly annoyed him, he remembered later, that her presence gave him a feeling of being restricted in his choice of words and phrases, limited in the type of risqué anecdotes and jokes for which he was famous. The third time he had seen her was after a meeting that had been held in his private suite at the Randolph. When the gathering broke up, a half dozen or more reporters had come knocking on the door and, as usual, Marcus invited them in, phoned for more ice and cigars while he went into the bedroom and got out a few more quarts of bourbon.

He saw her when she came in with the others. After the last of them had gone he recalled that he hadn't seen her leave with them and assumed she had slipped out earlier. Once alone, he locked the door, drew the curtains, and took off his jacket, loosened his tie, slipped out of his shoes, and stood in his sock feet while he mixed a tall, cold drink for himself. He took a fresh cigar from the humidor and lit it, then sat in the large, comfortable chair and stretched his long legs out luxuriously so that the heels of his feet rested on the edge of the sofa. It had been a hard, tense three days and he could use this moment of relaxation. There would be, he knew, harder, more tense days ahead.

"Excuse me," the small voice said.

The surprise of it caused his head to jerk around in the direction of the bedroom, and in so doing, he managed to spill some of the whiskey from the tall glass onto his shirt and trousers. He jumped up, dabbing at the spreading wet spots with a handkerchief, the cigar at an awkward angle in his mouth. He put down the glass and removed the cigar and stared at her as she stood in the bedroom doorway, the light striking her from the back so that he could hardly make out her features in the dimness of the sitting room. She seemed

to be taller than he remembered her before, and when she came forward, he saw that she was extremely well put together, with firm legs, widening hips, a very small waist, and firm, generous breasts.

Her face was plain and undistinguished, her nose a fraction too long and tilted upward slightly, lips that were full and a measure too wide. Her hair was cut short and looked as though it had been hacked at, like a comic wig or hat had been pulled down over her head, giving her a peculiarly childlike, gamin-ish look, not without some charm. She held a dark blue tam-type hat crushed in one hand.

It's her outlandish, godawful clothes and that horrible haircut, he thought at that moment, the mannishness of her suit and an apparent carelessness about her that seemed almost studied, practiced. She seemed so outrageously ridiculous, so different from the women he was accustomed to meeting. But even then, there had been that certain quality that attracted him to her, a vital alive-ness about her.

"Wh—where did you come from?" Marcus asked in genuine surprise. "I caught a glimpse of you when the others first came in, but I thought you'd left long ago. I don't think these meetings have much to offer the society pages of your paper, anyway."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Radford. I didn't mean to startle you," she apologized. "I'm—I don't write a society column. My field is politics."

"I must apologize for not remembering your name," Marcus said.

"I'm Tracy Englander." She held out a hand, manlike.

He took it into his own and shook it lightly, measuring its firmness. "Tom Englander of the *Examiner*. You kin to Tom?"

"His daughter."

"Well, I'll be damned. I've known Tom for more than twenty years, I guess. Didn't know he had a daughter." Marcus motioned to a chair. "You drink?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'll have one if that's bourbon you're drinking. With water. And a cigarette."

While Marcus poured the drink for her, added water to it from the pitcher, and offered the box of cigarettes, she said, "I don't expect Daddy would mention he had a daughter unless he had some way of tying it into a news story. I'm not one he could brag about much otherwise."

Marcus held a match to her cigarette. "Now suppose you tell me why you hid in the bedroom while everybody else was in here?"

"I wanted to see you alone after they'd gone," she said simply.

"That's very flattering, Miss Englander, but hardly wise. And what

do you think I'll tell you now that I wouldn't tell the other reporters?"

"If you don't mind bluntness, Mr. Radford, it was that apocryphal pap you were handing out. About how you all sat in closed session and came up with an orderly, friendly disagreement about candidates and that you're going to stay with David Kerr Sampler while the party pontiff goes for James Lynch. We've had it for months that Mr. Sampler was going to be the unanimous choice for the governorship and go before the state convention with the party's full support. That came to us from Mr. Farrington himself with the blessings of the governor.

"What happened to change things so suddenly? Who fell down the stairs and broke his political shinbone? And whose foot was it that tripped him?" She sipped at her drink, watched his eyes narrow, then said, "In other words, Mr. Radford," she smiled, "who got left out of a deal somewhere?"

Marcus studied the girl as she spoke, grinning broadly when she posed her concluding question. "Now where would a nice young girl like you get such unladylike impressions?" he asked with feigned surprise. "As if smoking and drinking bourbon in a strange man's hotel suite weren't bad enough for the younger generation, you have to come in here making noises like an old, experienced political snoop."

She laughed delightedly and he was surprised at the musical quality of her laughter. "Oh, come now, Mr. Radford. I don't make things up with the hope of fooling someone into an admission he might not otherwise make. Not a brilliant student of politics like yourself. I know that somewhere along the right-of-way a deal fell through and half the party is backing away from its earlier commitment. Suddenly the unanimity of the party is destroyed and there are two major candidates' to go before the convention to do battle. And you take the stand that this is an everyday normal event in the life of a political leader?"

Marcus laughed brightly. "You're pretty cute, aren't you?"

"I'm sure you mean that as a compliment to my mental state and not the physical," she said.

He caught the change of her tone, wondered why she would say something so deliberately hurtful and thus call attention to the plainness of her, to emphasize the fact that she was no beauty. "I'm just as sure I mean it both ways," he said kindly and firmly.

"Neither unjustified nor uncalled-for flattery will take my mind off my job, Mr. Radford," she replied. "I know that sudden changes like this don't just happen accidentally. There are deals, good and

bad, compromises, wheels moving around within wheels, matters that are connected to smoke-filled rooms and meetings such as you have been holding these last few days and nights. It reeks with the hint of an open split within the party, almost something like the time you went out to beat Mr. Grayson on behalf of Mr. Lawson, only this time the battle appears to be a much bigger and tougher one."

Marcus tried evasion. "You couldn't possibly remember anything about the Grayson-Lawson campaign—"

"I've spent hours in the *Examiner* morgue reading all about you and your rise in the state political picture," she replied.

"How did you happen to pick such a dull subject to concentrate your efforts on?" he asked.

"I'm no society- or police-type reporter, Mr. Radford. I love politics. But right now, I'd like to know what's behind a politically inept and immature man like Mr. Lynch. Or, rather, *who* is behind him. Not that I think Mr. Sampler is anybody's bargain, either."

Marcus stared at the girl with a new respect, meanwhile pouring more of the bourbon for both glasses, taking the opportunity to listen to her voice while she could not watch the reaction on his face. She couldn't, he thought, be more than twenty-four or twenty-five and yet she already had a certain amount of poise and the political alertness and acumen of reporters many years her senior in this specialized field. True, her father was owner and publisher of the highly respected Chancellor *Examiner* and that, of course, was part of the answer to her astute and somewhat mature outlook. He began to feel a strong attraction for this girl who sat regarding him as something of an adversary on one hand, as a man with whom she could converse on equal terms on the other.

She moved over to the sofa and sat down, drawing one silk-sheathed leg upward under her. He brought the drinks over, sat down beside her, close. They drank silently, contemplating each other studiously over the rims of their glasses. Marcus smiled at her and she returned the gaminlike smile and then he was aware that something more physical than a mere smile had passed between them. Her glass was still one-third full when he took it from her hand gently and put it, with his, on the table that stood beside the sofa. He returned to her, moving a bit closer. She had room to move or lean backward and away from him had she wanted to, somehow knowing that if she had, he would have advanced no farther; but she chose to remain in her exact position. The smile faded slowly from her face, her eyes narrowed as, in that moment, she wondered with

calm deliberation what kind of a lover he would make, feeling without uncertainty that within a short time she would know the answer to her silent question.

He kissed her lightly and she was ready for it, now showing a marked response beyond the façade of cool curiosity as she felt his firm lips upon hers. He drew back and saw that she had not moved out of reach. Her closely cropped head was tilted slightly, invitingly, the quizzical line of her lips curved into the faintest trace of a smile. He moved forward and kissed her again, more firmly, less speculatively, and now he felt an urgent, electric response in her partly opened lips, the arch of her arm around his neck gripping him with eagerness and warmth. She drew herself closer within the curve of his arms, her former cool reserve totally abandoned; and in Marcus's sudden and overpowering desire for this woman, who was far less beautiful than Martha-Louise, he forgot completely about his wife, who was far less a woman than Tracy Englander.

It was night and the darkness sheathed them like a protective cloak as they lay upon the bed, sharing the one cigarette she had lit for them. She was telling Marcus how it had been with her, an unattractive, bookish girl at an age when she was discovering from other girls how important it was to be attractive, to have a following of boys. That had been when she was fifteen, then sixteen, then seventeen, the three years when older and well-meaning friends had frequently said to her parents, "Don't worry. She has lots of time. She will fill out and be a real beauty." But it hadn't happened that way and she had told herself she didn't care; except that it was easier to tell herself this than it was to make herself believe it.

"My mother and father and an aunt or two used to bribe boys secretly to take me to dances and parties. When that ran out, they tried a mild form of blackmail, or bribery. I was the first and only girl of my age to have a car of her own so that other boys and girls would gravitate toward me. We had a stable of riding horses for the same reason, and Daddy and Mother practically turned the house into a country club in order to encourage everyone to hang out there, plan things there so that I would have to be included. But the more my folks fed and encouraged and pushed, the more I found myself backing away from it all, hating every bit of it. I studied all the harder and made up my mind that no one in my class would ever get a better mark in any subject than I. I passed at the head of the class and Daddy couldn't say 'No' when I marched in and told him I was ready to go to work on the paper."

"And you've been on the *Examiner* ever since?" Marcus asked.

"No. I've had my turn out in the world. One day I hit one of those important 'firsts' in a person's life. A newspaper in St. Louis picked up an editorial I'd written for Dad and asked permission to reprint it. It was picked up in Washington, then New York and Chicago. Later on it happened again and, a few months later, a third time. The St. Louis paper wrote and offered me a job and I talked it over with Daddy and Mother and decided to take it. They were bowled over in St. Louis when they found out that down here Tracy was a *girl's* name. Also, they thought I would be a much older person. I'd been out of college only a year then."

"How do you happen to be back here again?"

"I stayed in St. Louis for a year, then switched to a paper in Chicago. After six months there, I went on to New York. Then, back home to Chancellor."

"And all the while, I assume, you were telling yourself that your physical appearance was working against you."

She moved up on one elbow and stared directly into Marcus's eyes, then laughed with that wonderously musical laugh. "Are you, for God's sake, going to tell me that I'm beautiful? Or attractive? Or even mildly good-looking?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. Certainly I wouldn't attempt to tell you anything in your present belligerent mood. Not even that we should get dressed and have some dinner. Maybe later, when you've calmed down and are in a more reasonable mood, we might belabor that interesting point."

She lay back on her pillow and felt his hand grasping hers. "I feel so good, Marcus, so really good. And I haven't felt that for a long time," she said with pure joy in her voice. "Let me try to tell you how it is with me," she went on, feeling a compulsive urge to talk to him. "Dressed and in a vertical position, I'm not much competition for most women. Here, like this, in a room at night with only the moon coming through the window for light, I'll give a few points away to any female."

Marcus said, "Come now, Tracy, if you would only try to stop feeling so damned sorry for yourself when there's really no need for it. Hell, all you need is a good dressmaker, a hairdresser, and a few cosmetics and a new attitude toward yourself. That's all any other woman's got on you or ever had on you. But what you've got on them is that you're more woman than most of them ever were or ever will be."

He lit cigarettes for both and she said with light good humor,

"Go on, Marcus. You're beginning to interest me in a fascinating sort of way."

"All right then, Tracy, listen. My mother was what most people would call a plain-looking woman. My father was a rough and tough and handsome man, and when they got married, it was the town's favorite and often-repeated vulgarity that Justin Radford had screwed himself into the fortune John Fox Turner had spent a whole lifetime building up. But it wasn't like that at all. I know that. My mother had a heart and a brain and a soul that were more beautiful than any I ever knew then, or have known since, something no one has ever been able to match on the outside surface. One important thing I know is that no man in this world was ever happier than my father.

"On the other hand, I married a beauty, the sight of whom still makes me the envy of almost every man in town, married or single, young or old. And I don't think I've ever really known a moment of true happiness with her. Nor she with me. She's a lovely, handsome, beautiful woman and, by God, she knows it. And so she should. Her mother and father and everybody else around her have been telling her that for years, ever since she was old enough to understand that she had something most women never have. She was so damned much in love with her own face and body that she couldn't stand having to share it with any man, someone who might abuse her beauty, rob her of it by coarse contact."

He couldn't bring himself to tell her, as he had never told anyone, the details of his first night together with Martha-Louise, when he discovered the true depth of her narcissistic feelings. He could hardly believe them himself. That first night of their honeymoon when he had been so in love with her, longing to take her, the feeling in him so great that he had hardly noticed her lack of acceptance of him, putting it down to natural shyness.

And then, later in the dark hours of early morning, when the small noises of her moving about had wakened him. He put out his hand to touch her, but she was not in the bed. Nor in the room. He got up and went into the sitting room and there she was, standing at the ceiling-to-floor window, crying softly to herself. He struck a match to the gas light and turned it up as she swung around, watching him in a state of sheer terror. She wore only a thin negligee, holding her hands behind her.

"What is it, Martha-Louise?" he asked with deep concern. "Why are you so distressed, love?"

"It's nothing, Marcus," she replied, "nothing to be concerned over. I just—just can't fall asleep. Go on back to bed. Please."

But he had gone to her, saw the tears spilling out of her eyes, felt her trembling like a leaf in a winter wind although the room was very warm. She backed away from him as far as she could, touching the window. He reached behind her and brought her hands around in front. He took the balled-up nightgown out of her clenched hands and held it up between them.

"Why?" he asked, but even as she hid her face in her hands, he knew the answer. She had taken it off and was preparing to get rid of it. Purist that she was, in her first physical contact with a male, even though he was her husband, she felt soiled and degraded. The nightgown had become a symbol of her defilement. She couldn't destroy her body, but she could destroy the symbol.

"When was Bethann born?" Tracy asked.

"At the end of the same year, almost five years ago." He laughed wryly. "When we got back from our honeymoon, there was a big party given for us by her mother. Martha-Louise was in a rare, gay mood, surrounded by her father and mother, all her friends and relatives, so snug and safe and secure among them. There was lots of champagne and everyone there, it seems, had to propose a toast of some kind to the happy couple. Us." He laughed outright at the thought.

"By the time we got home, Martha-Louise was floating around in a special kind of alcoholic heaven. And before she could realize what was happening, it was too late. The champagne was still working for both of us and it was the first real enjoyment I had of her. And she of me. I figured then that I'd have to keep her drunk for the rest of her life. But by the next day, it had all worn off and remorse set in. Everything went back on the old, sober standard. And then it happened. She'd been careless and was pregnant and realized that her beautiful body would become swollen and misshapen and horrible for her to behold in her dressing mirror. She even threatened suicide, and when I told her to go ahead and save me the trouble of killing her, she quieted down. But that just about marked the end between us as far as a man-and-wife relationship was concerned. She suffered the pangs of hell every minute she was carrying, and when Bethann was born, the cord was cut for good."

He turned to Tracy who had her eyes pinned fiercely upon his face during the telling. "I don't know just why the hell I'm telling you all this," he said, puzzled at his own talkativeness. "I've never told

any of this to anyone else. I've never even wanted to think about it, let alone talk about it."

"I've got the same feeling about you, Marcus. I've stripped myself pretty bare, and no pun intended." She smiled. "I guess there's some kind of sameness in us that pulls us together."

"I hope so, Tracy," Marcus said soberly. "I hope you're right. I've found a kind of peace of mind in you that I've never had before, a kind I need. I don't want to lose it now."

They were silent for a while. Tracy reached for a cigarette and lighted it. She got off the bed and went to the table at the far side of the room and he heard a glass clink with the ice she dropped into it. "Drink?" she asked, bringing the one glass back to the bed with her.

"No," he said. "I don't need a drink right now. With you here, I've got all the stimulation I can handle."

She stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray and sat down on the bed beside him. "If you don't mind, Marcus, I'll take that as a very fine compliment."

He drew her downward and moved his lips across her cheek, nuzzled her neck. "You know there can't be a marriage, don't you, Tracy?"

"I know," she replied with some sadness. "But it's all right with me. I don't suppose I'll really miss something I've never planned on having. We'll see each other, won't we?"

"If you want. I come up to Chancellor pretty irregularly, but from now on I'll find more reasons to be here. Also, I travel around the state often. Lots of times I make trips into other states as well."

"I do some traveling myself, Marcus," she said, "following the candidates and election circuses around until the final vote is counted."

"Well, then," Marcus smiled happily, "we ought to be able to arrange things, a couple of smart people like us. Now let's get dressed and get us a pair of steaks thick as a dictionary."

7.

They met frequently during the gubernatorial campaign. There were Galesburg, Tevor City, Benton Courthouse, Shipleyville, and other key campaign points. When the troupe hit Regis, they had to exercise extreme caution. They would be there from Thursday through the following Monday. With Ed Pringle's cooperation, Tracy was installed in a large room on the fourth floor of the Regis Hotel.

The Sampler-for-Governor party had taken six rooms on the third floor, and at night, when the political activity had died away, Marcus would call "good night" to the other members of the "circus" and go to the stairway instead of to the elevator. He would climb the one flight to Tracy's room.

She had been to Regis before, but now Tracy saw it all in a new perspective—as it related to Marcus Audrey Radford. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that this was his town, his county. With the press group, she was invited to Radford Hall and toured the plantation, the stables, enjoyed the hospitality and grandeur of the Radford mansion and way of life.

She met Martha-Louise, feeling a dank coldness creep over her at the touch of her hand, the sight of a woman who could smile without meaning, and who looked upon these people as she would at rabble. Bethann, whom Tracy wanted very much to see, was not permitted to meet her father's "business associates." "I don't feel that she is old enough to be exposed to this sort of thing," Martha-Louise replied to a visiting reporter's request.

She heard the townspeople speak of Marcus with the same reverence they showed the Flag. She sat at lunch and dinner at the Regis Hotel and heard civic leaders and politicians from this and nearby counties speak of Marcus Radford as though he were the principal candidate instead of the pink, soft-fleshed, worried little man who was David Kerr Sampler. But she thought little of this at the time. What flashed back into her mind was the beautiful, haughty woman who had stood beside Marcus with a flinty smile of disdain for these people who were not, nor could ever be, of her own special world. It was painful for Tracy to imagine what her own life might be like if *she* could stand in Martha-Louise's place.

And that night, in her bedroom on the fourth floor, she said to Marcus, "With what you have, what you are, what your name stands for, what is it, Marcus, that drives you to work for men like David Kerr Sampler and their cheap political ambitions? With your ability and personality, you could be governor, a truly great and—"

Marcus snorted impatiently. "Governor. Hell, that's a big something, isn't it? No, Tracy, I might once have given some thought to it, but I lost the desire long ago."

"What killed it?" she asked. "I'd really like to know, Marcus. Tell me, please."

He smiled crookedly and said, "It's not too easy to explain why a man looks down on the governorship of his state, but I'll try to

make you understand. You wouldn't remember much about Governor Estys Penton, would you? No, of course you wouldn't. I wasn't much more than a youngster myself then."

"I remember his name, of course. He was supposed to have been one of our better statesmen."

"Estys Penton," Marcus mused aloud. "A tall man with a shaggy white mane. Great orator with a rich, deep, booming voice. The people loved to be seen talking with him, shaking his hand. He could roar like a lion and claw the opposition to pieces with his command of words and phrases. He was one of our truly great public figures."

"And do you know why, my sweet child? Because my father, Justin Radford, had a string around his neck, and when Justin pulled it, old Estys's mouth opened and Justin's words came tumbling out. And when my father would wind up the key, Penton would sign the bills he was told to sign, which to veto, when to smile or cough or cat or sleep, or even cohabit with his wife. And in those four years of his reign as governor, States Engineering and Construction Corporation, owned by Justin Radford and my grandfather, John Fox Turner, built most of the state's roads, bridges, and buildings. And that great servant of the people, that 'better statesman,' as you called him a moment ago, was really the servant of my father and grandfather and he got his twenty-percent share of the net profits, enough to live on more than comfortably after he was out of office."

"Governor Penton? The—"

Marcus nodded. "The same. The man they eulogized for hours when he died and the public inched along in Chancellor for an entire day and night for the privilege of one last look at the face of one of the biggest grafters ever to sit in the governor's office." He sighed.

"You want to blame my grandfather or father for it? Well, don't. They didn't change Penton's character or put the larceny into his heart, not any more than I can change Sampler. If they hadn't taken the spoils, others would, even if Penton had had to search the entire state to find them. In this business, Tracy, the big sin isn't so much the stealing, only in being caught at it."

"You're not trying to tell me that all elected officials are corrupt, Marcus, are you? That their appointees are equally dishonest?" she asked with a small smile.

Marcus laughed, knowing that she was leading him. "No, Tracy, not at all. Not even the majority of them are dishonest. But the few who are, those in key offices, are enough. There have been and always will be a majority of honest people elected to all offices from the governor's down through the entire legislature. But no one knows

until a man gets into his office just how honest or corrupt he will be. How hungry he is, and for what.

"When a man on top wants something for the state or a particular county, or say a profitable contract for a good friend, or a relative, or a campaign contributor of some magnitude, or a loyal party worker, a deal has got to be made somewhere, with someone. That starts the ball rolling. A deal for a deal, a favor for a favor, money in exchange for a contract. And then one day a man's term in office is over and sometimes he leaves it with relief that the damned job is finally done and the hope that no one will discover how deeply he was involved in some of the manipulating and hanky-panky that went on behind the scenes. Or if his successor does discover what went on, that he will be smart enough to shut up and keep the process continuing for his own benefit and let his predecessor to hell alone.

"No, sweet girl, that's not for me. Let the power-hungry and the money-hungry run for their offices. I'll be what I was born to be, trained to be: the power *behind* the men with the power, standing there pulling the strings. The very real and most potent power of all. The kind a man makes for himself and can't be voted into or out of by anybody else. Only himself."

During July, Bethann seemed to be completely preoccupied with her own thoughts. She wandered about restlessly, rode Shahzadi hard, drove her car at speeds only the daughter of Marcus Radford could have chanced and gotten away with. Luther caught glimpses of her at a distance from time to time, but she made no effort to take up their old friendship beyond raising her arm in a casual wave of recognition; and even before he could return the signal, she would be gone from sight. He haunted the creek but never met her there "accidentally"; she no longer rode down to the Dorman fence line to seek him out. That which had once been between them was gone. He knew it and resented it.

Carrie no longer brought home any gossip from the Hall unless it was something that had no relation to Miss Bethann, purposely refraining from any mention of her because of her awareness of the effect of Mr. Marcus's pointed request to her to speak to Luther about keeping his distance. Angrily, Luther began spending more of his time in town, going to the movies or participating in "just hanging around," an occupation that generally took place in or about Tam Nariocas' poolroom, which was used as a gathering place for meetings, social operations, to shoot a few games of pool for

small bets and, having spun away the hours, go home. It was here that Luther reawakened his friendship with Dale Hagen, who was older than himself by four years, a neighbor who lived out on County Road some three miles west of the Dorman place. Dale worked at some indefinite, seldom-discussed job that had to do with Tam Nariocas, and it was evidently a satisfactory one since he seemed to be well supplied with pocket money; also, he owned a car of sorts and this placed him in an upper-echelon status among the hangers-on. Frequently, he would offer to give Luther a lift home from town, even though it meant going three miles past his own destination.

For all the diversion offered by his companions in town, time hung heavily on his hands. He sought out Cressie Jackson, the light-skinned daughter of a Negro tenant farmer who lived a few miles north of the creek on the Radford place and, with her, spent some of the hot summer nights at the creek "cooling off"; and when this pretense had worn thin, they would sneak off into the woods to the cabin that once belonged to a Radford overseer and had later been converted into an elaborate and well-furnished playhouse for Bethann. Since her first year at high school, the cabin had fallen into disuse. Now it served Luther and Cressie as a convenient shelter for their stolen moments.

Later in July, a change came over Bethann. Suddenly, there seemed to be some direction and meaning to her days and evenings. Even Marcus noticed and remarked upon it to Sudie, whose once-strident voice had now aged into a toothless, almost indistinguishable mumble. "Ah guess she done gotten rid a d'figits she gotten up dere in dat place she goin' t' school."

The restlessness and driving tension were gone. Calmly, she discussed a plan with Marcus—that she would take some basic instruction in library work from Grace Constance at the City Library. When she felt sufficiently qualified, she would establish a much-needed library at the County General Hospital, complete with a mobile unit for the benefit of the non-ambulatory patients. She had discussed this with the hospital superintendent, the chief of medicine, and the head of the nursing staff, and all had agreed that this would be a most welcome, needed, and long-sought addition. With another girl to divide the work, perhaps two, the library could operate six days each week. She had already spoken to Lucia Davis and Wallis Traynor and both were eager to undertake the project with her.

Marcus not only gave his hearty approval but agreed to supply

the mobile cart and donate a substantial sum for the procurement of books. He would talk with Dr. Menzies, the hospital superintendent, and ask that a room be set aside for the purpose. He would—

When Bethann left him, Marcus began to wonder if the change in her he had hoped for was now taking place, the realization that he could become close friend and confidant as well as father. So far, so good. At this rate, she might well begin to show an interest in other projects; and people—people her own age: Otis Markland's boy, Ross, whom Marcus liked very much; Ed Pringle's boy, Dave; even Kell Ransom's flossy, poetry-spouting Michael (never Mike), who was an identical twin of Celia and as quiet and well mannered as the girl was a riotous imp. Of them all, Marcus preferred Ross and he was happy they had gotten along so well at Chancellor during their first year. Perhaps by the time three more years passed something might come of it; and this thought was a pleasing one to Marcus.

In mid-August, Thad Clark, who was superintendent of schools, called upon Marcus at the bank.

"Thad, what can I possibly do for a man who has reached your venerable stage of life?" Marcus greeted his old friend with a smile. "Your first-graders aren't getting out of hand, are they?"

"No, Marcus, not more than usual, thank goodness. An uprising among them might very well undo a career of fifty-odd years and would reflect no glory on my name if we were forced to call out the state militia." Mr. Clark, who had taught Marcus in his sixth grade and become principal, later raised to superintendent of schools by Marcus, began fussing with the straps of his battered brief case, from which he now took out a file. "I need your opinion about a young man, an applicant for a teaching position on our high school staff."

Marcus said, "Why now, Thad? I can't remember you coming to me before with your hiring problems."

"You're right, Marcus—" Clark breathed heavily with the exertion of movement—"but I would still appreciate your personal judgment on this young man's general qualifications."

Puzzled, Marcus took up the file and scanned each document: formal application, certifications of degrees and postgraduate work, letters from numerous professors, two members of the clergy, business and personal references.

"Everything seems to be in order, Thad," Marcus commented. "From Massachusetts originally, I see."

"Born in Malden, educated in Boston public schools, one year at Harvard. In that year he was orphaned when his father and mother

were drowned in a boating accident. Moved south to Chancellor to live with his only remaining relative, Lucy-Marie Harwick, a maiden aunt. Three years at the state university there, teaching credentials in order, postgraduate work in Literature, ambitions leading toward a writing career. Excellent material, Marcus, excellent; and hard to come by these days."

Marcus smiled his wonderment. "Then why do you need my approval?" he asked.

Clark said, "On the morning I received Garrett Harwick's application, your daughter came to visit me. She told me she had known Mr. Harwick at the university and that he was searching for a teaching position. She knew he intended filing with our county school system and urged me to accept him on our high school staff here in Regis. I—thought—you might be interested."

Marcus thought for a moment, then laughed. "Someone she met at college and who probably asked her to help get him the post, Thad. No more than that, I'm sure. If Bethann knows him, I'm all the more sure that's in his favor. I'd say put him on."

With that, he dismissed the matter from his mind.

9.

During the first week of August, Garrett Harwick appeared in Regis for a personal interview with Superintendent Clark, who was at once impressed with the applicant's serious, businesslike bearing and manner. His acceptance into the school system was instant and both men showed their pleasure. From his room at the Regis Hotel, Garrett called Ross Markland.

"Welcome, neighbor," Ross greeted immediately.

"How did you know so soon? I was accepted less than an hour ago," Garrett said.

"Beth phoned me that you would be in for an interview this morning. She'd already talked with Thad Clark, and just in case anything went wrong there, I was keeping my father in reserve. But with Beth tackling Clark, I knew that was all it needed."

"Does she always get what she wants? I knew the Radfords had the town pretty well sewed up, from what you'd told me, but—"

"Skip it, chum. I'll be right over to pick you up."

At lunch in the hotel dining room, Ross introduced Garrett to other diners and Garrett was struck with their open friendliness and the warm welcome extended him when they learned he would be living and teaching in Regis. Almost all had in one way or another

said, "Anything I can do for you while you're here, Mr. Harwick, you just call on me."

When they had finished their meal, Ross said, "Well, let's get you checked out of here and settled."

"I need your help on that, Ross. I'd like to find a place where I can—"

"It's all settled, Gar. There's plenty of room at the Marklands'. A room to yourself if you want it, or you can share the polo field I call my room. You'll have it all to yourself when I go back to Chancellor in September. You'll be company for Dad while I'm away."

Garrett smiled his appreciation. "Thanks, old chum, but I can't accept. My teaching job doesn't include the super-elegant way of life and I'd have no way to repay the Markland hospitality. I need quiet and seclusion where I can get down to serious writing after a day of wrestling with the stratospheric problems of my high school freshmen."

At Garrett's insistence they drove about the town in search of something suitable for his needs, Ross meanwhile pointing out buildings and sites of interest, the Square, civic and memorial buildings that ringed it, the bank, and other Radford holdings. By three o'clock, the search, with little result, was over.

"That's about it, Gar, except for a few old caves back in the north woods, or the Swamp across the river. By the way, did you call Beth after getting squared away with Clark?"

"No. I've been putting it off until I'm settled. She doesn't even know I'm in town yet."

Ross chuckled. "I'll put up twenty to your one she not only knows you're in town, but that you've already been accepted and are out riding about with me. Let's get back to business, chum. All we've seen that is available is room and board with a family. And you don't want that. The only alternative is for you to make do in one of the fishing cottages along the river. You could rent one by the year for peanuts, but you'd have to do a lot of fixing up and—"

Garrett jumped at the proposal. "Let's take a look, Ross. It sounds like just the thing I'm looking for."

The cottage he chose was little more than a frame shack with a few sticks of rickety furniture in the large room that looked across a ratty porch into the river. The bedroom contained only an iron bedstead with a thin lumpy mattress. There were no curtains, no entirely uncracked pieces of china or pots or pans in the kitchen.

The floors were bare and the only running water was by way of a hand pump in the kitchen. There was a primitive bathroom. A thick layer of dust covered everything.

"Holy cow, Gar, you can't live in a dump like this!" Ross protested. "Even if you cleaned it up and furnished it, these shacks can be freezing cold in the winter."

Garrett laughed. "And you forget that I was born and raised in Massachusetts where a cottage like this along the Cape would seem like a palace. Kitchen, bedroom, living room, kitchen pump, a—uh—bathroom of sorts. Hell, man, with a lot of paint, some carpentry, a few secondhand things, and plenty of firewood growing outside my door to give me exercise and fuel, what more do I need?"

His enthusiasm was so genuine that Ross fell in with his acceptance. "Okay, Gar, we'll make a community project out of it. I'll get a gang together this weekend and we'll put the place to rights. Just like in the old days of barn-raising. We'll need paint, brushes, lumber, tools, carpeting—"

Ross was as good as his word. By Friday night plans had been made and organized. On Saturday morning Ross arrived with Dave Pringle, Sam Collier, Chad Borden, Jeff Miller, the two Wilson brothers, and two Negroes to lend a hand with the cleaning. Early in the afternoon came Bethann with Lucia Davis, Chad Borden's sister, Della, and Wallis Traynor. The station wagon was sent back with Newton to pick up articles the girls had shopped for all morning.

While the men worked at their painting and carpentry tasks outside, the feminine brigade went to work inside at such tasks they would never allow themselves to be caught performing in their own homes. The Negro helpers cleared the grounds around the cottage, replaced missing pickets in the fence, chopped firewood, scrubbed floors and walls under critical supervision. A truck arrived from town with the carpeting, which was put down over the bare floors; next came a new mattress and linens, a sofa, straight chairs, a dining table, rocking chair, two small chests and other miscellaneous tables and pieces that had been "discovered" in attics and barns and added to the other "comforts of home," coal-oil lamps (since there was no electricity), and the final and central piece: the huge iron, pot-bellied stove.

When they finished late on Sunday afternoon, they celebrated with a swim in the Welcome River and a supper brought by Newton from the Hall, courtesy of Sudie. By nightfall Garrett was installed in his

new home: a place to live, to work; and Bethann saw that this was more than he had expected or hoped for.

Now if she could share this with him—his work, hopes, dreams, and ambitions.

His life.

10.

September came quickly. The fall school term would begin soon and Garrett was completely involved with preparations for it, grateful for the help of his fellow instructors in smoothing out the numerous problems that were all so new and mysterious to him at this stage.

Bethann was deeply engrossed in her hospital library project. Space had been donated, the mobile cart ordered and on its way, a partial list of needed books was made up with the help of Grace Constance of the City Library. She came one day to Marcus's office, Marcus taking in the small, worried frown on her face.

"Trouble, honey?" he asked.

She shrugged. "The hospital library."

"What about it? Problems?"

"A few."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"It's just that it's not going too well and I should be getting ready to go back to Chancellor."

"And?"

"Daddy, I want to stay in Regis and go ahead with the library. I think it's a lot more important than going back to Chancellor. I'd so much rather stay here and work with people and books."

The thought that she would want to remain in Regis, with him at the Hall, had never entered his mind before, and now, the loneliness of the empty Hall wiped away by her request, he said happily, "If that's what you want to do, honey, you go right ahead. I won't mind for even a minute. You can always go back to Chancellor if you change your mind."

Chapter 2

1. May, 1945

The war had been over in Europe since the seventh of the month and on the tenth Luther Dorman lay convalescing in a private room at the 886th General Hospital within a few miles of London. On that morning the chief of medical services flicked through a packet of medical reports, memos, TWX's, and letters. He smiled at the staff officer standing before him with his easy, assured, elegant Pentagon manner, in crisp, immaculate uniform, the General Staff stars glittering importantly on his lapels. The tired, white-haired medical officer closed the file and looked up with a slow smile.

"He's all yours, Captain," he said to the younger man. "The lung is almost good as new, the chest wound healed cleanly. The thigh wounds are doing well, and outside of tiring easily for the next few months or so, he should be able to perform admirably with one or two canes. A nice sea voyage home will set him up just dandy."

The clean-shaven captain smiled at the older man. "Not this boy, Colonel," he replied. "He's special. We're flying him to Washington in a VIP plane. He's got a date with the President of the United States in person. As of yesterday morning, Master Sergeant Luther Dorman became a Medal of Honor man."

Former Private Luther Dorman had been awarded the Infantry Combat Badge and promoted to Master Sergeant personally and simultaneously by Division Commander Major General Robert Cleland Bentley an hour before he was flown out of Germany, still unconscious, attended by a medical officer of his division until he reached a rear-echelon hospital in France. A few days later he had been flown back to the 886th in England.

Now he lay quietly in his private room as a medical orderly shaved the three-day accumulation of downy blond whiskers from his face. His nurse, First Lieutenant Claudia Holliman, came into the room, and had he paid particular notice, he would have seen the excite-

ment of her news reflected in her handsome, young-girlish face. She came toward the bed and took Luther's pulse, then held his hand in hers as she spoke.

"How do you feel this morning, Luther?"

"Okay, I guess. Nothing hurting anywhere. Can I get out and move around the grounds some more today, Lieutenant?"

"You bet. Any time you're ready," she replied with smiling exuberance. "It's a sunny, beautiful day for a change. You'll enjoy being out in it."

He pulled away from the razor and both he and the orderly looked at her curiously. "What are you so jazzed up about all of a sudden, for Pete's sake?" the orderly asked.

She ignored him. "I've got some good news for you, Luther. Now promise me first that you won't get too excited or upset when I tell you. Ready?"

"Sure," he smiled broadly. "I'm ready."

"All right. Colonel Chesler has just signed a clearance for your release from the hospital. Would you like to guess where you're going?"

"F'God's *sake!*" the orderly exploded. "Tell him already, will you? You nurses! 'Now promise me first that you won't get too excited or upset when I tell you,'" he mimicked. "Okay. Okay. So now you got him all steamed up, drop the bomb on him, why don't you?"

"Corporal Unger, get out of this room," Lieutenant Holliman ordered.

"Aw, come on, come on now, sweetie. Don't try to make like an Army lieutenant with me. Be a nice kid and break with the news already, will you?"

"Then keep your mouth closed." To Luther she said with a bright smile, "Guess?"

"Back to my old outfit?"

Claudia Holliman shook her head prettily. "No. You're going to get up and get dressed in a special uniform and practice walking around with your two canes for the next few days. On Sunday night you're going to get on a plane and fly back to the States. To Washington, D.C."

Luther looked up in puzzled confusion, frowning.

"Dr. Killibride of the hospital staff and a Lieutenant Harry Bledso from your own outfit are going with you. And that's not all. I've just been chosen to be your nurse for the trip. Now, how about *that!*"

The medical orderly looked on in astonishment. Now he put down the razor and began wiping his hands feverishly on the small towel.

"Holy cow! Holy *cow*! Hey, Lieutenant, don't I ever get a break? I been on this case with Luther as long as you been. How come I don't get to make the trip back, too?"

She grinned with good-natured superiority. "Why don't you ask Luther to request you, Johnny? Right now he can have almost anything he wants."

"What?" Johnny Unger exclaimed. Luther looked up at her with the same quizzical expression written on Unger's face.

"Luther," she said, "you're the biggest name in the United States today. The White House has announced that you've been awarded the Medal of Honor! Honestly! President Truman has sent for you himself, and on next Tuesday he's going to present the medal to you in person. And I'm going to be there to see it. First Lieutenant Claudia Holliman, charming, lovely member of the Army Nurse Corps, of Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A. will be at the White House and have her picture taken with you and the President of the United States! Poor dad, this might even kill him, seeing his eldest daughter standing within five miles of President Harry Truman! He'll be drummed out of the Republican Party within twenty-four hours!"

Luther stared at her in utter amazement, then turned to look at the astonishment on Corporal Unger's face.

"Well I'll be go-to-hell!" the orderly breathed.

He knew he had to face the fact that sooner or later he would have to go back. For the moment he felt gratefully relieved that he was not being sent back to his unit. He had the feeling that if he were forced to come face to face with his friends and the officers again, particularly Captain Wentworth, that somehow, in some indefinable way, they would be able to see through him, know that he was a complete fraud, was in fact a coward who had failed his friends, his country—a failure even in his attempt to kill himself in fear of exposure.

He remembered with deep guilt the morning when he woke in the warmth of the room shared by Major Thorpe and Lieutenant Bledso, the two doctors who were working over him, the general himself pacing quietly on the far side of the room, all to the annoyance of the two medical men. General Bentley would stop to question them every few minutes, they reassuring him that medically, physically, Luther Dorman would make it. Unless complications set in.

Major Slocum said, "General, if he's got the will to live, he'll make it fine. I've seen men in much worse shape than this boy, so much worse that no doctor would take fifty-to-one odds that they'd pull

through; but they came around on sheer will. There've been others who sank into black despair for some unknown reason and died when they shouldn't have—for no known medical reason."

"Thank you for your generous little dissertation, Major," the prim general said drily, "but I don't give one good goddamn about the others. I'm concerned with this boy and *only* this boy at the moment."

Slocum looked up in annoyance and replied, "He'll make it, General." As the general turned to leave, Slocum threw the hook toward him once more. "If complications don't set in," he added with a wintry smile.

Bentley then called Major Thorpe and Colonel Mitchell into the room he used as his office and in their presence ordered Luther cited for extraordinary bravery above and beyond the call of duty. He had Thorpe note for the record Luther's promotion to Master Sergeant, a battlefield promotion, plus the award of a Combat Infantry Badge. Bledso came in then, and at that moment Slocum came back into the room and told the general that Luther had just recovered consciousness, asked him not to press the boy too hard. The general got up and went into the room, stood at the side of the bed.

"Son, I want to ask you a few questions—" he began, but Slocum said, "Hold it, General. I don't think he is aware of what's going on around him." The general waited impatiently as Slocum checked Luther's pulse, then said, "General, I doubt if it would be wise to try to get him to talk. I would suggest you do nothing to excite him. Any questioning of last night's events can only be harmful to him. I think we should keep him as quiet as possible until we can get him out of here and back to a general hospital where adequate X-ray facilities are available and the full extent of the damage can be learned."

Luther heard this statement and his own native intelligence told him that he had been furnished with an escape from having to talk about what happened the night before. As long as the doctor wanted to keep him quiet, he didn't have to say anything; and as long as he kept quiet, they could guess all they wanted; and evidently they had guessed wrong so far, since he was lying here in a warm room in a warm bed instead of outside in the cold medical tent. He decided that discretion was the wiser choice and feigned sleep. Fate had shuffled the cards and dealt them this way. He would play the hand as it came to him.

The younger medical officer followed Slocum and the general out, consulted with the senior doctor for a moment, and returned to Luther. He took up a syringe and a small bottle, inserted the

needle through the flat top, drew the fluid into the barrel of the syringe, and tapped the plunger so that a few drops of the liquid squirted into the air. The general stood behind Slocum in the doorway and watched. "We're giving him another sedative shot, General," the doctor said. "Then we'll move him out to the plane."

Bentley moved away then, thwarted in his quest for information. He went into immediate conference with Thorpe and other members of his staff, giving them instructions for preparing the recommendation for a Medal of Honor award. "And you, Bledso, you stay with him all the way back to England or to the States if necessary. I'll have orders cut for you to accompany him. Don't let anybody interfere with his having the best of everything a national hero deserves."

Thorpe had looked at Bledso and Bledso had looked away from both the major and the general, staring out of the window toward a group of men who stood waiting to hear the word. Then Corporal Paul Tullis came into the room and walked softly over toward the bed where Luther lay.

"Luther?" Paul said quietly.

Luther's eyes remained closed but his lips moved in silence. The medical lieutenant said, "Not now, Corporal. He can't talk and probably wouldn't know what he was saying if he could."

Tullis looked down at Luther, his head shaking slowly from side to side in disbelief, almost as though he were witnessing a saintly miracle taking place. "Jeez!" he said with reverence in his voice. "Luther Dorman, of all people!"

Then an orderly came into the room to tell the doctor that the plane was ready to receive its special charge.

The night before they left England was the worst. Each time he fell asleep, he dreamed that whole horrible, fearful night over again, relived it step by step from the minute the patrol had taken off until he lay on the rim of the machine-gun crater, striking the lighter and catching the first glimpse of Dale Hagen's face, knowing that he, with the first shot he had ever fired at another human being, had killed his friend, husband of the girl with whom he had gone to school, the girl who was the mother of his good friend's son. He lit a cigarette and drew on it, trying to rid himself of his thoughts, but when he had finished smoking and fallen back into what he hoped would be a dreamless sleep, there it was again, unwinding countless tiny frames of pictures as though he were two people, one sitting in a theater watching the thing happen as a story, the other as the principal villain who had murdered his best friend.

Twice, Claudia Holliman came in while he was smoking and asked him if he wanted a sleeping pill and he had said "no" both times, feeling that if he took the pill he would sleep too deeply, be unable to awaken and thus escape the horror of his recurring dream even for a brief respite. Lieutenant Holliman had turned on the small night light and sat with him, speaking softly to him.

"Is something bothering you, Luther?"

"Nothing hurts anywhere," he replied noncommittally.

"I don't mean that. I mean something that might be disturbing you about—well, about going back."

He hesitated before answering. "Are you in any trouble at home, Luther? With your wife or family?" she asked.

"No, not that, Claudia. I'm not married. My only family is a father and a sister. My mother died when I was a kid. My sister raised me."

"She must be a very wonderful person to have done such a good job of it," Claudia said.

Her mention of Carrie in this manner brought tears to his eyes. He turned his head away from Claudia and she reached out and took up his hand. "Don't be ashamed to cry, Luther," she said. "No one should be ashamed of being homesick or longing for someone, a father or a sister. It shows that he, at least, has someone somewhere whom he loves, who loves and misses him. Tell me about your family."

Luther turned back to her. "Carrie is a wonderful girl, all right. She took my mother's place when she was only about fourteen and tried to do a mother's job raising me. My father—I—I— My father." He looked up at Claudia and a small, wry curl came to his mouth. "You come from a nice family, don't you?" he said. "Sure. You've got the same kind of look, a kind of *class* about you, I guess you'd call it, like some of the men I've met in the Army."

"You could say it's a nice family," Claudia said. "In fact, you could even say it's a very nice family. I'm so glad I'm going back with you tomorrow, Luther. I'll be able to see my father and mother and my sister and two brothers. It's been over two years now. Boy, will they ever be surprised!"

"I feel like that about my sister, too. More than anybody else, I'd like to see Carrie."

"And your father?"

"My father," he said slowly, looking away from her, "is a drunk. A no-good, poor, white-trash sharecropper. And that's an honest-to-God fact."

He caught the gasp of shock before she exclaimed, "I don't believe it!"

He nodded his head. "It's the truth. My father hasn't been sober one whole day that I can remember since before my mother died."

"Do you think this—your—coming home this way—you know—might make a change in him?" Claudia asked.

Luther smiled wryly and without humor. "The only change it will make in the old man will be the amount of extra corn whiskey he'll be able to drink if people come out to visit when I get home."

2. November, 1940

Carrie Dorman stood at the kitchen sink washing the supper dishes from which she and Luther had eaten. Just the two of them. Jud was in his room just off the kitchen. She had fed him earlier, some soup with a slice of bread soaked in it. She had urged a small piece of the roast pork on him, but Jud could no longer digest solid foods without considerable difficulty. He was happier with liquids and semi-liquids, preferably the locally distilled corn whiskey. Through the window above the sink Carrie could see the daylight disappearing fast under the thickening, slate-gray overcast, although it was still too early for nightfall. There had been a feel of moisture in the air all afternoon and now she was sure they would be in for a rainy spell.

Luther came back into the kitchen and flicked the light switch on, whistling gaily as he crossed the room, bringing the last of the dishes to Carrie from the table. He picked up a dry dish towel she had laid out for him and began wiping the heavy dinner plates. Suddenly the notes fell off. He looked at Carrie, her head bent over the sink, almost too intent on the remaining dishes beneath the frothy suds.

"What's the matter, Car?" he asked with concern. "Don't you feel good? Whyn't you sit and rest while I finish up here?"

Carrie shook her head and said nothing.

"Car, what's wrong? You're not sick or something, are you?"

She shook her head negatively and he knew without seeing her face that she was, or had been, crying. He put the plate and towel down, went to her and spun her around to face him, taking up her apron to dry her soapy hands.

"What's the matter, Car? Tell me. Somethin' happen at the Hall?" She looked up and said, "I'm just worried, I guess."

"Worried? About what? Him?" He shrugged his head toward Jud's bedroom.

"No, Luther. It's you I'm worried about. You."

"Me?" He stepped back half a pace, his face reflecting surprise. "Me? Now why in the world would you be worryin' about me, for God's sake?"

"I don't like you running around with boys like Dale Hagen and Paul Tullis and those Tidwell brothers. You're just twenty. There's not a one of them under twenty-one. Dale's twenty-two or twenty-three if he's a day. Paul's at least twenty-six."

"I don't see a damn thing wrong in that, Car. Jesus, if—"

"That's *one* of the things that's wrong with it. Only one. Using that kind of language, taking the Lord's name in vain the way you been doing. You've got so used to it, you don't even notice it any more. It's bad enough the kind of language *he* uses around here, let alone you bringing more of it home with you."

"Car, I'm sorry. I didn't know—"

"Luther," she said suddenly, "I don't mean to be picking on you, I honestly don't. I know you need to get away from here once in a while and I'm not blaming you for it. It's not much of a life for you, grubbing away at this patch of ground that don't even belong to us. But it worries me, you spending so much of your time in town."

"No harm in me going to the movies, is there?"

"No, not at all. If it's only the movies you're going to." There was mild accusation in her next words. "You've been hanging around that poolroom."

Luther laughed easily. "Is that all's bothering you, Car? Shoot, that's nothing to worry about. I just—just—" This would be the time to tell her. He reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a ten-dollar bill, a five, and five ones, spread them out fanlike for her to see. "Look at this, Car. I didn't get this hanging around Tam Nariocas' poolroom. I got it helping out on a truck run down to Carvel night before last. Just *one night* and I made twenty dollars driving! Twenty dollars! That's the second time I got to help out and made me twenty dollars each time. You can't expect me to turn down easy money for a few hours of driving, can you? And there's a good chance that I can get this job regular—"

"Oh, Luther," Carrie said unhappily, "you're mixed up with that Greek who runs the whiskey business. The poolroom and his trucking business, they're just a part of it. Everybody knows that." Luther showed no surprise that she knew or suspected.

"Okay," he admitted. "Sure I am. Except that you're making it sound a lot worse than it is, like I was out robbing filling stations or

holding up stores. Listen, Car, it ain't like I'm getting into any trouble. I don't know who's behind it, but there's some mighty big men who are a part of the business, so nothing's going to happen to anybody works for them."

"That don't make it right, does it, Luther? I don't care who's in it or part of it, it's wrong. It's against the law and someday you and Dale Hagen and Paul Tullis and the rest of them are all going to get caught and sent to prison. Then what?"

Luther laughed again but a tinge of uneasiness edged his nonchalance. "How come you to think a thing like that, for Pete's sake? That's just crazy. They been in business since before I was born, came through prohibition until after repeal—"

"Repeal never made any difference in a dry state, did it? They're not paying any federal or state taxes and there's a law against moon-shining and you know it."

"All right. All right, Car, but they got protection all over the state. And outside of it, too. And nobody here is goin' a get caught, I tell you. I'm not even a regular driver yet. They're still checking me out. If it wasn't for the draft taking a lot of the boys out of Regis County, I wouldn't even get a smell at a good job like this. You know how many grown men'd give an arm and a leg to get a job like this one?" There was no answer from her and after a pause he continued, "By next year, if I'm working steady and they don't draft me, we could have us a car so's you wouldn't have to ride buses any more. And you could stop working like a damn nigger for the Radfords—"

He knew he'd made a mistake the moment the word crossed his lips, and before he could retract it, Carrie lashed back at him, her face flushed with anger. "I told you a hundred times or more if I told you once, Luther Dorman, don't you ever use that word! It's mean and dirty and not fit for anybody decent to use."

He snapped impatiently, "What're you getting so fussed about? Just because you work up at the Hall with Sudie and Newton, you got to take their part all the time? Hell, they use that word amongst theirselves all the time. Down in Buckeytown anybody with ears can hear one calling the other 'nigger-this' and 'nigger-that' and 'dirty nigger' whenever there's more than two of 'em together. If they can do it, what's so wrong about me doin' it?"

"It's none of your business, no matter what they want to call each other. It's wrong for white folks to—"

Luther said quickly, "I'm sorry, Carrie. You know I don't mean it the wrong way."

"Maybe not, but when white people say it, there's no other way

to mean it except wrong. That's something else you picked up around that poolroom. God knows what else you'll pick up and bring home with you one of these days."

He spun away from her, angry again. "Goddamn it, Car, you treat me like I was twelve years old!" he snarled.

"Only when you act like it!" she snapped back at him. "You're twenty and you think you're a big man. Well, I'm twenty-eight and I don't know all there is to know yet. We've both of us got a long, long way to go before we know all the answers."

He turned back again, his hands outstretched, pleadingly. "Is there anything wrong, me wanting to support us so you can stop working at the Hall like a colored housemaid; so you can *buy* your own clothes instead of wearing Miss Bethann's hand-me-downs, being beholden to them all our lives? We could even fix up the house decent, like other folks. We could—"

"Luther, I don't know what to say. Only that *I-don't-want-you-mixed-up-with-that-kind-of-thing!* We got one in the house we can't do anything with except wait till he drinks himself to death. I don't want anything like that to happen to you, too. You're the only thing I've got to live for since Mama died. *I don't want anything bad to happen to you!* Can't you understand something as simple as that? I promised Mama I'd raise you right. I swore to her that I would and I'm not even coming close to keeping my word to her. *I-don't-want-you-to-go-bad!*"

Luther held her arms tightly, shaken by her passionate display of fear for him. He held her until she was quiet again and then her strained gaze fell away from his face. He said, "I'm not going bad, Carrie, but I can't live the rest of my life the way you're living yours, here on a piece of land that's so worn out it don't even pay back what it costs to plant. I watched you throw your whole life away on this place and on *him*, then living only for me. What the hell kind of a dog's life is that for you, working for the Radfords all day long, then waiting on *him* hand and foot, staying awake nights until I come home, not having a home decent enough for you to enjoy? Not having any friends, like you used to have until he drove 'em all off. Then when you collect your week's wages, having to buy him a week's supply of his white lightning just to keep him drunk and out of the way.

"Sure, you're one of the people that's supporting the moonshiners and you're talking against them in the same breath, but if it wasn't for them, what would you do about *him*? Well, I want more than that for me and I want more than that for you, by God, and if I

can give it to us by working for Tam Nariocas, then I'm goin' a do it. You got a lot better than this coming to you."

"Luther, Luther, honey," she cried softly, "I don't *want* anything better than to take care of you and see you grow up a decent and good man, so you can get married to a nice girl and have you a family of your own." Carrie's impassioned voice became stronger now and its depth and sincerity shook him visibly.

"I got to tell you this, Carrie. For one thing, I'm already a grown man. Age got nothing to do with it. I've been grown ever since I was fifteen, sixteen, only you can't see it and you'll never see it, because if I live to be a hundred and you're a hundred and eight, you'll always look at me and see no more'n your little brother that needs drying behind the ears and his cowlick smoothed back in place. You're twenty-eight years old now. A little fixing up and a few nice clothes and you could take your pick of the best in Regis. Only you'll never be able to do it as long as you got to work all day and worry all night. I want to make some money so you can quit working and spend a little more time with the women and girls your own age in town, start going back to church Sundays again. Like you used to, remember?"

She knew he was referring to Fred Archer who once had courted her seriously and had been driven off by Jud in a moment of drunken anger at the thought of losing her; Fred Archer, who had since married and was now the father of two daughters.

"Oh, Luther," she cried through her tears, "we both want so much for each other and we keep trying so hard to get it, all we're doing is making ourselves unhappy doing it. I wish I knew. I only wish I knew."

For a moment the closeness she thought had escaped them came back again and she was determined that it would not leave them; no matter what happened, she knew, she needed Luther all the more now, even if he did feel that he no longer needed her. At that moment they both heard the sound of the horn from the front of the house. Luther held her arms tightly, asking silently if she would be all right if he left her. Her head bobbed up and down in assent. "You go along, Luther," she said with deep resignation that she tried unsuccessfully to keep out of her voice. "We'll talk about it another time."

He pulled her close to him and kissed her hard in a rare moment of sheer affection. "You're all right, Carrie; the most wonderful sister a body ever had, and I sure do love you for it. Don't you ever worry

about not doing a good job on me. If you didn't, it sure ain't your fault and I'll be the first one to say so."

The horn tooted again, impatience in the length of its strident voice. "That's Dale, Carrie," Luther said.

"Take a raincoat with you. It's been itching to rain all afternoon long."

"Okay. Good night, Car. And don't you go worrying about me or waiting up for me, you hear?"

"You take care, hon," she admonished.

He turned and ran down the hallway to the front door and a minute later she heard the car as it pulled away from the house. She began to wonder if she could go to Marcus Radford and have a quiet talk with him about Luther. Maybe he could get Luther a job somewhere—somewhere away from the evil influence under which he had fallen.

As the soft drizzle of earlier evening turned into a heavier, wind-driven rain, Luther cranked the lower handle beside him to bring more air into the truck cab to help defog the windshield. He reached out in front of him and nudged the windshield wiper switch from Low to High. The wipers flashed across the glass in an erratic, off-rhythm beat, clacking loudly. Dale Hagen, sitting between Luther and Johnny Norris, said, "That damned wiper."

"Why don't you get it fixed?" Johnny asked. "It won't come out of your pocket."

Dale grinned. "It ain't that, Johnny. It's like the man with the hole in his roof. When it's raining, he can't get up there to fix it and when it ain't raining, it don't need fixing. I never think of it until after it starts to rain."

Johnny laughed easily, pleasantly. "You got it tough. You got it so tough you even got yourself—" he nodded toward Luther—"an assistant," he finished with a mild touch of good-natured sarcasm.

Dale said quickly, "Now listen, Johnny. I talked to Tam about it and he said it was okay about Luther, didn't he? Luther's a good driver. What's more, he's sober and a lot more reliable than the other guys you tried out for the job. You checked him out on that first trip to Baton Rouge yourself, didn't you? I had him on the run down to Carvel the other night. And now this one. You got any complaints the way he handles himself, or the truck, or the niggers?"

Luther drove on silently, making no comment, hoping this light

discussion that concerned him would not create a situation in which he would wind up losing a job even before it could become permanent. He had a feeling that Johnny approved of him, particularly after the Baton Rouge trip when, because of a shortage of help on that end, he had stepped in without being asked, or told, and shouldered the sacks of sugar they were loading for the trip back to Regis.

Johnny had said then, "You don't have to be doing a nigger's work, kid," but Luther insisted on working along with the Negroes. "One more shoulder'll help finish the job that much quicker," Luther had replied.

He could hear Dale's voice above the grinding of the gears, the dull roar of the motor and the creaking of the 210-case load they were carrying under the canvas tarpaulin. "I've known Luther most of my life. His family lives only a couple of miles up on County Road, so we been kind of neighbors for years. He's never been in no kind of trouble, ever. Hell, I wouldn't bring him to see Tam if I didn't know he was okay, would I? And get myself fired—?"

"Okay, okay, Dale," Johnny said gently, "don't get yourself worked up in an uproar. I told you we'd see, didn't I?"

Dale had suggested Luther for the job earlier in the year, but the man-power shortage had not yet become acute at that time. Now, late in 1941, Nariocas had lost a number of men to the draft and Dale had again suggested Luther as a replacement. When Tam finally nodded assent and Luther was taken on the trip to Baton Rouge on a trial basis, it seemed that Luther's prayers had finally been answered. He'd show them. By God, he'd do everything they asked of him and then more. He could drive well enough. He was learning from Dale how to coax more work out of the Negroes, who seemed to know every trick to produce less work—or none at all. Treat them well, look after them at all times, but never give them a cent until the job was done. And never turn your back on them while they were loading or unloading the white lightning. A case would turn up without its lid and five or six bottles would disappear in the wink of an eye. A case would drop "Accidentally, boss," and four bottles would be broken, but the other eight would be safe. And loose. And pilferable.

Now he wished the discussion of his merits would come to a stop. He felt a desperate need to make good tonight; if all went well, Johnny would pass favorably on his ability, and on Johnny's word, Luther would go on the regular payroll and start driving on alternate days and nights with Dale. This would be his final and giant step into independence. A steady job, money of his own; a car,

perhaps. Clothes for Carrie and himself. And no more charity from the Radfords.

They were nearing the Square and Luther knew they would head for the loading platform in the alley behind the poolroom that was Tam Nariocas' operating headquarters. This was but one of several warehouses in the immediate vicinity.

"Easy now, kid," Johnny cautioned. "Don't cut through the Square. Go down Purcell and come up Medairy, then through the alley to the warehouse."

"Sure, Johnny," Luther said, following the directions as though Dale had not gone over the route carefully with him earlier. Johnny was a short, stocky man, close on to thirty, Luther guessed. He was swarthy and had jet black hair that curled in small, tight twists and glistened with sharp highlights whenever a stray light struck his head. His arms and legs were well muscled and there was every evidence that he could more than take care of himself in a fight. He was good-looking and good-humored and well liked, and Luther had every reason to believe that Johnny was equally popular in New Orleans, Mobile, and the other major trips he made. Certainly he was a favorite in the places they had visited the night they laid over in Baton Rouge. Johnny was a generous spender and would settle for nothing less than the best in hotels, food, drinks, and girls.

"First class," he would say. "When I go, I go first class and everybody with me goes first class, too. Live it up, boys. Johnny's paying the bills."

Johnny had Anglicized the name Nariocas into Norris and was a good ten or twelve years younger than his brother Tamburo, who was officially registered as owner and operator of Regis Truck Lines, which, like the poolroom, was a front for the distribution of the illicit corn whiskey distilled in the Swamp on the far side of the Welcome River, beyond the Negro section known as Buckeytown.

The small bulb in the alley window flared dully in the misty rain, its faint glow hardly visible from beyond thirty yards. As the truck approached it, suddenly the faint yellow light died out, the pre-arranged signal from inside the warehouse that all was clear to proceed with the business at hand. At this hour of morning, a few minutes before 2:30, there was no traffic along the side streets they had traversed, none in this alley. Only a few lights along the main thoroughfare had shone through the falling rain and low fog. The red and green traffic lights in the Square had gone off at midnight.

Now, as they pulled up closer to the warehouse, Dale leaned forward and cut the dimmed truck lights off.

"Slow down to a walk," he guided Luther. Then, "Ease it up alongside the platform."

The huge, mist-shrouded truck crunched along the cobblestoned alley and came to an easy stop beside the platform. Four Negroes came out of the warehouse, coned sugar sacks protecting their heads and shoulders, urged to life by a raincoated and -hatted white man who snarled curses at them. The unloading began with untying the ropes that held the tarpaulin in place. Back and forth the Negroes moved silently, each carrying the wooden cases two at a time, stacking them inside the building, each time getting a bit more soaked as they stepped from the protection of the overhang onto the tailgate of the truck, then inside to pick up the next two cases.

Johnny Norris and Dale Hagen got out of the truck cab and put on their black, shiny rain slickers, preferring this to the stuffy cab—reminding Luther that even with Carrie's urging, he had forgotten to take his own slicker along. They moved up the steps to the platform and stood under the protecting overhang and lit their cigarettes. The white man who had been superintending the Negroes came over and joined them.

"Chrissakes, Paul," Hagen complained, "can't you shake 'em up? They're moving slower'n molasses."

"You got a lot of room to talk," Paul Tullis returned fitfully. "What the hell you guys been doin' all this time? One o'clock, you said, Johnny, didn't you? We been sittin' around in that goddamned icebox since a quarter of one so's you guys can show up at two-thirty."

"Okay, okay, let's quit the scrabbling and get the job done. Knock it off, Paul. You, too, Dale," Johnny said tersely. Then to Paul Tullis, "The barge was late coming out of the Swamp in this fog. We couldn't load the truck till the barge came down, could we?"

"Well," Paul agreed, "I guess not, but don't blame me if them coons ain't workin' faster. They like to froze waitin' in there. I had to break open a case and put out a few bottles, else they'd a pulled out on me," Tullis added.

"Okay. How about putting the push to 'em, will you, Paul? This rain cuts through me like a knife going through warm butter," Dale said.

"Sure, Paul," Johnny grinned. "You know how it is, don't you? It's wet and cold and dark as a landlord's heart and if you'd just got yourself married to a nice armful of gal, you'd feel like a block of

ice out here, too." He turned to Dale, slapped a friendly hand across his shoulder, making the moisture leap outward from the slicker. "Just hold your horses, Dale boy. You'll get home to it in time."

Tullis leered toothily. He knew what a lot of people thought of Ruth-Rachel—that before she had married Dale, she was making out a lot better after hours than during those she worked as a waitress at the Golden Palace Restaurant. He said to Dale, "How's about a drink, boy? I know it ain't much of a substitute for crawlin' in bed with a gal like Ruth-Rachel—"

Dale wheeled around and threw a hard right at Tullis, missing him by the merest fraction of space. "Listen, you nigger-whelped bastard," he began, squaring off instinctively, but Tullis, at a signal from Johnny, backed off and went back to herding the Negroes about their work, having stopped to watch what they had come to believe would make an interesting fight.

Dale stood on the platform glowering at Tullis's back. In all the time he had worked with him, he had never liked Tullis. For one reason, Paul had a cruel streak in him and was noted for his unwarranted abuse of the Negroes with whom he dealt. For another, Dale knew that Tullis carried a switchblade in his left trouser pocket and that he would use it if pressed.

Johnny said calmly, "You'd better take it easy, Dale. You know what Tam's orders are about fighting among ourselves."

Dale remembered. "Any my boys gets to fightin', they both fired right on the spot, no matter who's right, who's wrong. They fight, they both wrong. Both fired. *Zut!* Quick! Like *that!*" Tam had emphasized the words with snaps of his thick fingers, giving off reports like shots from a small-caliber pistol.

"Okay, Johnny." Dale grinned now, the fire gone out of him. "Soon's they're finished I'll drive the truck to the garage and—"

"You will like hell, buddy-boy. You'll drop the niggers off first," Johnny said emphatically.

"Jesus, Johnny," Dale protested, "that'll take me another hour going back to Buckeytown with them, then out to the garage."

Luther Dorman had joined them on the platform, overheard this last part of the conversation. "I don't mind taking 'em back, Johnny," he said. "Why don't Dale go on home and I'll take the truck up to my house after I drop 'em off? I can drive it over to Dale's place sometime tomorrow morning."

"No," Johnny said firmly. "You're here to learn, Luther, so you might as well learn this right from the start. So far, you're doing a good job. But when you take a run, from the Swamp to here or

anywhere else, you do the whole job from start to finish. That's what you'll be getting paid to do. That and nothing less." He turned back to Dale. "You drop the niggers off first. They're a little stoked-up with the white lightning Tullis fed 'em to keep warm on. Tam don't want any stoked-up niggers walkin' around town this time of mornin'. They get into a fight and all we've got is trouble. Then— Hell, what are you complaining about, Dale? We all got warm beds waiting for us, the same as you. You're getting paid damned good money every week, with a bonus at the end of every month, for hauling the stuff. If you ain't satisfied, of course—?"

"Take it easy, Johnny," Dale said, his voice contrite now. "I know what the score is. I'll drop 'em off."

"Okay, then. Don't go making such a big deal out of it. Tomorrow night you'll take the haul up to Camp Gillespie. Hillhoff is screaming for another load with all those new draftees pouring in ass-over-teakettle."

"Tomorrow night?" Dale said. "I thought we were supposed to get a full day and night off between—"

"For Christ's sake, Dale," Johnny's exasperated voice cut through the misty air, "can't you use the extra money, a guy like you just married a couple of months? I can get guys to drive every night in the week for fifty a load and an extra hundred bucks bonus every month. I got 'em coming all the way up from New Orleans asking for the job. Those draftees in every camp in the state are as thirsty as a drunk coming off a six-month revival pledge. We let our customers go dry, somebody else'll move in and supply 'em. Make up your mind, boy; are you in or out?"

Hagen pitched the cigarette out into the open where the rain put its cherry-red tip out and washed it across the bricked pavement into the gutter. "I'm in, Johnny," Dale said. "Can I have Luther along on this trip? He ain't been to Gillespie yet."

"Sure. If it's all right with Luther."

Luther hesitated before replying, unwilling to commit himself definitely. "I don't know yet, Johnny," he said. "Let me check and see how things are at home. That's an overnight run and—"

Dale laughed. "You still scared of your sister, Luther? Well, don't go getting in no trouble with Carrie, now. She's a nice gal and I wouldn't want her—" He stopped suddenly, peering past Luther and Johnny up the alley toward the Square. "Johnny! What's that?"

"Where?" Johnny swung around simultaneously with Luther to stare into the darkness behind them.

"Somebody just turned into the alley up at the corner. I saw the lamplight shining on his slicker for just a second when he turned in. Wait till he moves away from the buildings. I can't make him out now— *There!* You seen him then, didn't you?"

Johnny stared hard into the blackness. "I—don't—think—so, Dale," he said slowly.

Paul Tullis walked inside the truck quickly and now all activity stopped. In the silence they could hear the steady drumming of the rain on the truck's tarpaulin, on the corrugated iron overhang, and each man could hear his own breathing. Now they could also hear the footsteps coming toward them, clomping boldly along the narrow brick sidewalk without any effort to hide the noise. Suddenly a beam of light shot out from the darkness and found the three men huddled together on the platform. The flashlight in Johnny's hand sprang to life for a split second and found the intruder, then both beams were cut off quickly and all was darkness again. The strange figure stepped away from the wall and came toward them with quicker steps.

"It's okay," Johnny said to the others. "It's Hessie Loomis." He called softly to Tullis. "Okay, Paul. Let's move it." The movement inside the truck began again.

Hessie Loomis came up the steps and stood beside Johnny and Dale, the rain running off his oiled hat-cover and raincoat in small rivulets. He peered hard at Luther, turned away to greet the others.

"Hidy, Johnny, Hagen," he said with a voice filled with self-satisfaction.

"Hidy, Hessie," Johnny returned. "Ain't a fit night out for man nor beast. What are you doing out?"

"Just checkin' up on the beasts, Johnny," Hessie replied with a grin. "Who's this one?" He nodded his head in Luther's direction.

"Luther Dorman. We're breaking him in, showing him the routine," Johnny explained. "Luther, you know the chief deputy of the sheriff's office, don't you?"

Luther nodded without replying. Loomis said, "I know you, don't I, boy? Your old man got him a place out the County Road just this side a Radford Hall, ain't he?"

"That's right," Luther said softly. This man gave him a creepy feeling, as though an aura of evil hung over him. He had heard the stories of his sinister activities among the Negroes, the barbarous handling of prisoners of which he was capable.

"All right," Chief Deputy Loomis was saying directly to Luther.

"Now you know who I am, you better just remember and keep your mouth shut tight. I ever hear you been shootin' your mouth off, mentionin' me and this outfit in the same breath, you goin' a be a mighty sorry boy. You understan' me now, don't you?"

"Sure," Luther replied uncomfortably.

"You just *better* be sure."

Loomis turned back to Johnny Norris, who was lighting a cigarette and taking a deep draw on it. "How come you unloadin' 'thout lettin' me know in advance, Johnny?" the chief deputy said.

"I tried to get you, Hessie. They told me you were out."

"You try to get me again?"

"Sure. A couple of times. Four or five, as a matter of fact."

"You leave any word for me to call you back?"

"No. This was a special load I had to bring in. I wasn't calling from the office. I was over in Buckeytown. We brought a load of sugar in from Mobile and this load was coming through and we were the only empty truck around, so I got hold of Paul and a few boys who weren't working. What the hell, Hessie, you don't think I was trying to run a load past you, do you?"

"No. For sure, nothin' like that, Johnny," Hessie said through tightly pursed lips in a tone that belied his words. "I trust you and Tam, but we got us a agreement says you'll check every load in and out of Regis with me. Not every other load or every third load. *Every* load." Loomis grinned crookedly. "And this is a load, ain't it, Johnny? And a big load?"

"It's a full load," Johnny agreed drily. "Two hundred and ten cases."

"Okay. I'll just check it. I'll have to check what you got inside the warehouse because I didn't get in on the start. Matter of fact, I'm goin' a have to include everything that's in the warehouse along with what's in the truck."

"You can't do that, Hessie," Johnny protested. "There was at least a hundred and fifty cases in there before we started unloading."

"I got only your word for that, ain't I, Johnny?"

"Well, at least you know this truck only holds two hundred and ten cases when it's fully loaded."

"You may be right, Johnny, but for not clearin' with me in advance like you're supposed to, I even got a right to confiscate the whole damn load and you know it. That's part of the agreement, too. The deal with Tam is two dollars for every case shipped out of the county, one dollar a case for every case you put inside this

warehouse, whether you got two hundred or five hundred or a thousand cases in there."

"But—"

"Don't but me no buts, Johnny. How do I know this is the only load came in tonight? Next time you'll let me know when you goin' a unload here or anywheres else inside Regis County."

"Goddamn it, Hessie," Johnny began, but Hessie Loomis cut him short with a wave of his huge hand. "Ain't no use you goddamnin', Johnny. I never wrote them rules. Your own brother Tam made 'em up. And if I got to play by Tam's rules, then, by sure God, you and him got to play by the same rules. You don't trust me to let me know when a load is comin' in, I don't have to trust you either. You got your people to 'count to and I got mine." He turned away toward the warehouse door.

"Hell, Hessie, the sheriff himself—"

Loomis wheeled back to face Johnny. "You been told a dozen times or more not to mention him. I'm the onliest one you got to 'count to. You just forget about the sheriff and anybody else you got in your mind, you hear?"

Loomis turned away and went into the warehouse to start his count. Johnny moved back to his former position between Dale and Luther. Paul Tullis came out of the truck and stood with them.

"Son of a bitch," Johnny muttered under his breath.

"He's that, all right; every inch of him," Tullis agreed.

"He's no damn good, never was, and never will be," Dale threw in. Johnny looked around, went to the door, and saw that Loomis was busy checking the cases inside. He walked back to where Hagen, Tullis, and Luther stood at the edge of the platform, just out of the rain, the good-natured grin returning to his face as he shook his head in wonderment.

"I wonder how the hell he does it," Johnny said admiringly. "He's got feelers inside him like a blind bat flying through a forest of trees and not ever touching a single branch or bough. When everything is clean and aboveboard, he never shows up. Then just let me try to slip one load past him and *wham!* he's right there sitting on top of me. It's like he had an eye and ear working with us all the time."

He lit a fresh cigarette and offered the pack around. Luther marveled that he could take a defeat with such calm, easy grace.

"Two dollars a case?" Luther asked.

"That's right. Two dollars a case outside the county, one dollar

a case inside. And that's not all. He collects from the wholesalers and retailers, too. He and Sheriff Will Bartly and Mr. Big take in plenty every week, every month, and every year. But what the hell. We can't kick. We get the protection for it. Without that we couldn't stay in this business longer'n twenty-four hours."

"Mr. Big? Who's he?" Luther asked innocently.

The others laughed. Johnny said, "I could guess. I could even make a big bet and give you odds, but I'd better not. Just don't forget one thing, kid. Whoever Mr. Big is, he's got his fingers in every illegal operation and racket in the county and a good deal outside of it. Anything that can't operate without protection, he's got him a good piece of it."

"Watch it," Dale whispered. "Here he comes back again."

Chief Deputy Sheriff Hessie Loomis squinted out from beneath his rain hat, waved a hand in their direction, and said, "Well, men, happy dreams when you get around to it," and went down the steps and up the alley toward the Square.

"Sure, HESSIE," Johnny replied. "Good night." The others watched as the dark figure disappeared into the black, wet night.

"Bastards," HESSIE said to himself, chuckling lightly. "Try to slip one over on me, hey? Greek bastards."

Grabbing Tullis that night last spring had been a neat stroke, he congratulated himself. I knowed they was up to something, but I could never of got to it without some help from inside. But I got it, by sure God. I got it.

Paul Tullis had worked for Tam Nariocas for three years. Mostly, his job was to handle the loading of the corn whiskey after it came out of the Swamp. It was his primary duty to have one of the five trucks on hand at the small, secluded landing dock on the east side of the Welcome River about three miles north of the Negro community of Buckeytown. The Negroes who brought the whiskey out of the Swamp would join the men Tullis brought along with the truck so that the loading would go faster. Then Tullis or one of the other drivers who was available would make the delivery to the warehouse behind the poolroom in town, or the bigger one south of the railroad bridge, or still another one farther south, just inside the county line. Only the warehouse behind the poolroom had to be serviced at night since there were too many eyes about during the daytime.

The night back in March that crossed HESSIE's mind made him

chortle with glee. Two truckloads had come to the poolroom warehouse and Loomis had been there to check them in. He was standing in the alley ready to leave and the Negro crews had gotten aboard the trucks. Johnny locked the door to the warehouse and got into the cab of the second truck, gave the signal to pull out. There was a shout from Tullis.

"Wait a minute, Johnny!"

Tullis climbed down from the first truck and went back to talk to Johnny. "Give me the key for just a minute, Johnny, will you? I forgot and left my jacket inside."

Impatiently, Johnny reached into his trouser pocket and took out a ring of keys, fingered through them, and selected the right one. "Here it is," he said handing the keys to Tullis. "Get going, will you? I want to get out of here."

Paul sprinted up the steps, unlocked the door and went inside, and reappeared within a few seconds carrying his corduroy jacket over one arm. Johnny's voice floated back to him: "Make sure the door's locked, Paul."

Tullis took two steps back to the door and pulled the knob back and forth, ran down the steps to the truck and handed the keys back to Johnny, and got aboard the tailgate of the truck ahead, calling to its driver, "Let's go, Smoke."

As he sat in his car in the alley and witnessed this final scene, saw the two trucks pull away, Hessie grew thoughtful. Something had not seemed quite right about this little bit of business with Tullis and his jacket. It was almost as false as the ring of a counterfeit coin. He shook his head, got out of his car, and walked up the steps to the platform, then to the door. He put his hand on the knob and turned it.

The door opened easily.

Loomis grinned. So that was it. Leaving his coat inside was the first step. Waiting until Johnny was squeezed in tightly between two men in the truck cab was the second step. The scene clear in his mind now, Hessie closed the door and went back to his car. It made a nice, clear picture. Even the sound of the music that accompanied it was loud. He started the motor of his car and drove it as far as the Sheriff's Building, parked it in front where it could be seen easily. He put the ignition key in his pocket, walked around the circle to Medairy Street, came back down the alley to the warehouse behind the poolroom he had left only fifteen minutes before. He went up the four wooden steps, opened the door to the warehouse and went inside, turned his flashlight on, found a spot behind

a double stack of whiskey cases where he could sit and wait without too much discomfort.

A whole hour passed before he heard the motor of a car as it drove up alongside the platform, then cut out. He looked at the glowing hands of his wrist watch: 3:10. He peered out from behind the whiskey cases and saw the door open slowly, carefully. The man outside moved cautiously, stepped inside the large room, and closed the door behind him. He turned on no lights since he already knew just where what he sought could be located. Hessie heard the movement of case after case as the intruder stacked them near the door. Now the door opened again and against the dim light of night he could see the man carrying the cases out two at a time, returning six times until twelve cases had been removed. When he returned the last time to snap the inside spring lock and pull the door closed, Hessie was waiting for him, pistol in hand, flashlight beam thrown into the frightened, sweat-glistened face, its mouth open with complete shock.

"Well—" Hessie grinned evilly—"if it ain't our old friend, Mr. Tullis."

"Wh—wh—" Paul gasped.

"What was you about to say, Mr. Tullis?" Hessie asked in his friendliest tone, enjoying himself in the role of master of a situation in which he held all the trump cards.

"Un—uh—nothin', Mr. Loomis. Johnny said for me to come back—and—uh—pick up twelve cases."

"And just what are you supposed to do with them twelve cases this time a night?"

"He tol' me to—fo—uh—take 'em home with me and deliver 'em tomorrow mornin'."

"To who? Where at?" the deputy persisted.

"To—uh—Hash Maxwell, down toward Crandall. Hash, he run short an' sent word up to Johnny late this afternoon. Johnny, he—"

The grin disappeared from Hessie's face. "All right, Tullis, I'll tell you what. You just show me the key Johnny give you to get inside this here warehouse an' I'll ask your pardon for thinkin' you snuck back for your jacket so's you could leave the door unlocked from the inside. So's you could come back and help yourself to twelve cases of the stuff for your own self. If you ain't got the key, then I'll just have to hold you and this load and your car together in my jail till daylight, then turn you over to Tam Nariocas and his brother Johnny. Now, where's the key, Tullis?"

Tullis broke into a cold sweat. "Hessie, listen—"

Loomis brought his hand up and pushed it roughly across Tullis's face, not quite a slap, just enough to let him know it could be much harder and worse the next time. "Don't you be gettin' too damn friendly or familiar with me, boy," Loomis said. "You got that there key?"

Tullis shook his head dumbly. "No, Mr. Loomis," he said dully. "Okay. We'll see how Tam Nariocas takes this in the mornin'."

Hessie took Paul's arm and motioned him toward the whiskey-laden car. "Please, Mr. Loomis, don't do it," Tullis pleaded. "You know Tam. He'll kill me. He will. You know it."

"Sure I know it, but that ain't goin' a be much of a loss to Regis, now will it, boy?"

"Mr. Loomis, please don't do it. *Please!* Listen. I'll do anything you say. I'll put it back again right now and I swear I'll do anything you want me to do."

"Well, now, boy—" Hessie paused thoughtfully— "we might make us a deal at that. You get out there and haul that whiskey back inside while I think it over. Quick, now."

And so the whiskey was transferred back into the warehouse and Tullis waited for Loomis to tell him the terms of his "deal."

"All right, boy," Loomis said, "I'll tell you what you goin' a do for me. I know them boys been slippin' a load or two past me maybe every week or so. Now it ain't that they're stealin' money from me so much as it is that I don't like bein' suckered by nobody. What you goin' a do is this: whenever a load comes out a the Swamp, I want to know it. I want to know how many cases come out and where they goin' to and I want to know when."

Tullis was silent. "You listenin' to me, boy?" Loomis asked

"I hear you, Mr. Loomis."

"You goin' a deliver?"

"I'll deliver. I surely will, Mr. Loomis."

"All right, now. But if you don't, and I find it out, it's goin' a be your, hide a-hangin' on my fence gettin' dried out. You know that, don't you? Now that's just fine and dandy. You go on along home and have you a real good sleep. You been up 'way past your bed-time already and you look kinda tired."

6.

At midnight, Bethann had returned to the Hall, feeling the chill of the rain and night air. She ran quickly into the house and up the stairs to her room, undressed and prepared for bed. She was warm again with the memory of Garrett and the hours they had

spent together in his cottage on the river. So independent, so determined to "make it on my own without a rich father-in-law to pay my way." So exasperatingly male. And yet, it was this quality of independence, among his other qualities, that she admired so much in him. If he would only allow her to help in some small way, give her permission to fix up the fishing-shack-turned-cottage with a few more modern conveniences. Bring in electricity, install an electric refrigerator, lamps . . .

"I won't have it," he said quietly, stubbornly when she first suggested it. "Nobody minds the way a bachelor's quarters look."

"It's a pig sty," she argued.

"Only because I want it that way. I'll admit it's not the neatest place in the world, but it's comfortable and easy to work in. When my book is published, if it is ever published," he amended, "how will I ever be able to face the world and say, 'I not only did it in the comfort of a cozy cottage with every modern convenience and facility surrounding me, but I didn't starve; I wasn't even hungry. There was this rich man's beautiful daughter who—'"

"Oh, stop it!" she fumed. "Besides, it's my own money, not my father's. You don't have to be so smug and superior about preserving your holy independence, do you?"

"—supplied all the material comforts—" he continued.

"Damn it, Garrett, is there any law that says an author has *got* to suffer and starve in order to write? Do all writers, the common garden variety, the mediocre, the great, all get rid of their money and possessions before they sit down to starve out a book? Do—?"

"Shush, child," Garrett said, reaching for her. "I am not an author. Let's get that point settled first. An author is a writer who is paid money to write. I write with the hope of someday becoming an author. Meanwhile, I'm a twenty-six-year-old underpaid high school teacher and that I'll no doubt remain until I can finish my book and find out if someone will think it worthy to set in type and print on good paper. Then I'll become a celebrated author and come humbly to ask the daughter of the richest man in Regis County to marry me and make an honest scribbler out of me."

She kissed him and smiled. "And when will that be, Mr. Stubborn?"

"When I can afford to make a down payment on a dress like the one you have on now. And everything that goes with it."

"Until you noticed it, it was only a dress. Now that it has finally caught your attention and held it, it has become an investment that just paid its first dividend."

"Ah." Garrett got up and went to the desk, opened the top drawer, and withdrew a long envelope. With overly elaborate gestures he extracted a single letter-size sheet, unfolded it, and waved it toward her from across the room. "It may come sooner than you think, child. Sooner than you think."

She sat up on the sofa, her interest quickening at his words. "What is it, Gar? Have you heard from Creighton?"

He nodded and she knew from his smile that the news was better than he had expected. "Cause Without Hope," she knew, was a good, well-written, readable book, a novel of the 1861-70 era into which he had poured so much of himself as well as much authentic historical fact; this, because it was a period he had studied thoroughly and with which he had been in love ever since his early youth. She had read the original working draft and caught every bit of depth and understanding and compassion he had put into words, his honest appraisal of the North as well as the South. She had tried to read it objectively, knowing all the while that she could not be objective about Garrett Harwick or anything he wrote or did.

She should have known something was up, he had been in such a good mood all evening. He stood over her now, holding the letter daintily between thumb and forefinger, dangling it before her eyes. She could see the signature, "Crate," knew it was from his college friend, Creighton Lewis, now an assistant account executive with a prominent advertising agency in New York.

"Well! Read it to me, for heaven's sake! What does he say?"

"All in good time, child, in good time." He let the letter fall free into her outstretched hands. "You read it for yourself. Otherwise you'll accuse me of reading into it the things I'd want to hear for myself."

She grasped the letter with anxious, trembling fingers, righting it in her hands, forcing herself to read each line in proper sequence and not skip to the middle or bottom of the page.

DEAR GAR: (she read partly aloud)

I was so excited by the carbon copy of the first third of "Cause Without Hope" I couldn't wait to get it into the hands of Maury Wilkerson, an agent I met at a party some time ago, given by Gene Hoover, the principal art director at our agency. Gene has designed several book jackets for various publishers and is a close friend of Maury's, so it was fairly easy to manage.

Maury called me today and had this to say (and I am

trying to quote his exact words as I remember them): "If your friend can live up to the promise of what I've read so far, I'd say he has a good book and it might sell a lot of copies. When he's ready to submit the rest of the manuscript, I think I know where I can place it."

How about that, boy? Didn't Old Crate tell you 'way back in Chancellor you had what it takes?

Get busy and finish this thing up. If you've got any more of it ready, send carbon copies to me and I'll keep Maury's appetite sharpened.

With high hopes to match your high dreams,

CRATE

P.S. Well, what the hell are you just standing there with your mouth open for? Get busy, boy!

Bethann smiled sleepily. Such a lovely night it had been. Maury Wilkerson, she knew, would love the book as much as she had. He would sell it to a great publisher and Gar would become known. Long before that, however, she would become Mrs. Garrett Harwick. Mrs. Garrett Harwick. Just what she had wanted to be for so long, whether Gar became famous or not.

Now it was easy to fall asleep.

7.

On that same stormy November night, Carrie Dorman slept fitfully. The first heavy drops, powered against her bedroom window with strong gusts, played an irregular tattoo that disturbed the even rhythm of her sleep. She got out of bed, pulled the window down, shivered as the cold, damp air cut through her thin cotton nightgown. She pulled on her blue woolen robe, a gift from Miss Bethann the Christmas before, then crossed the hall to Jud's room, closed his window as he slept deeply, drunkenly, emitting a heavy snore. She closed the door to his room and padded down the narrow hallway to the front room where Luther slept. The blinds were drawn and the room was in pitch blackness. She knew he wasn't in bed, hadn't got home yet, but nevertheless she went to the bed, touched it, ran her hands over the pillow.

Back in her own room, she got back into her bed still wearing the robe. She thought unhappily about Luther and her head rolled from side to side a few times, lips pursed grimly, wondering over the situation that existed between them that she could not control. She had known that a day of rebellion would come, when he would no longer need her and would resent her "interfering" in his life; a

day when "the fellows" would supplant her. She knew that much of his anger was caused by telling him what Mr. Marcus had said about not wanting him to be too much in evidence at the Hall in the future. It had been bad enough to tell him that the first time, when he had been fifteen or sixteen. This last time, with Miss Bethann just home from college for her first vacation, it had been much worse.

Jud was no help at all. She knew how Luther felt about their father and she could hardly blame him. After all, he'd only been five when Effie Dorman died, the same year Miss Bethann's mother had died. Luther had never known Jud much before his fall, could remember little more than the part of him that was his drinking, incoherent speech, his vulgarities, the times when he mistook Carrie for Effie and would suddenly begin crying and using abusive language. Before the accident, Jud had been a hard worker, away most of the day at the Hall, coming home tired to labor over these same worn-out acres; and so there hadn't been much time for father and son to get acquainted in those earlier days.

She had cause for worry about Luther, she knew full well. It had become worse after Miss Bethann had come home and it galled him to see her and know that he was under orders to stay clear of her. Then he'd begun going into town more often; and later he started coming home late at night. Several nights he hadn't come home until near dawn.

More recently she began to see evidence of his sudden affluence in several new dress shirts and ties, two new sports shirts, a pair of slacks and the loafer-type shoes. On the top shelf of the hall closet he used were four cartons of cigarettes. And when she asked for an explanation of his sudden wealth, he had smiled secretly, pleased with himself. "Don't you worry none, Carrie," he said evasively. "I been helping a friend out and he paid me for it."

"How are you helping him out, Luther?" she persisted.

"Oh, nothin' much. Just helping out."

Exasperatedly, she said, "I'd have to be stone blind and an idiot not to know you're tied up with Dale Hagen in some way. You're headed for trouble, Luther, real bad trouble." She began to cry. "I promised Ma I'd look after you and raise you right. Lord only knows, I've tried. I've done my best. And that wasn't good enough. Now you're not much better'n—*him!*"

Luther had stalked out of the room angrily then, slamming the door behind him, refusing to admit, until tonight, that she was right. She knew his life here was not an attractive one, even less

attractive than hers. At least she could escape to her day work at the Hall for five and a half days each week; but Luther, confined to this homely patch of tired soil and the sight of his drunken father each day, hadn't much of a life to be happy about. She expected Luther to be overawed by Dale Hagen's patronage—Dale, who at twenty-three or twenty-four was already owner of a car and could offer Luther a glimpse of life that included money, girls, and clothes. Luther would work hard to walk the same path with Dale, she knew.

She toyed with the thought of speaking to Dale's mother, Lutie Hagen, but soon dismissed the idea. Lutie Hagen wasn't too much better than Jud Dorman—thought to be "queer" in her mind. Certainly, she acted queerly enough. She had money, it was believed, for Judah Jeremiah Hagen, a pinchpenny in life, had left considerable wealth behind when he died. Lutie dressed shabbily in shapeless black garments and walked about town mumbling pontifically what she called the "Lord's Own Word"; which were no more than pseudo-Biblical phrasings of her own manufacture, designed to authenticate any point she desired to make, or to call down the "Lord's Own Wrath" upon those who might offend her. Having lost her first two children, now watching Dale's disgusting and obvious infatuation with that trashy town girl, Ruth-Rachel Pierce, whom he had married without her regard or consent, Lutie now seemed more rancorous and unsettled than ever before.

Carrie looked at the small clock beside her bed and its radium-painted hands glowed dimly, pointing to the hour of 3:50. Almost four o'clock and he wasn't home in bed yet. It was too late to be "just hanging around" Tam Nariocas' poolroom with "the fellows."

Four-fifteen. She turned over on her side, hoping sleep would return to her before the alarm would go off at six-thirty. Now the rain slackened. She began to doze off. Before she could fall fully asleep she was awakened by the motor noise and splashing water as a car churned through the ruts in the dirt lane that led to the house. It came to a brief stop, its motor still purring, then a door slammed shut. She heard the car back up, turn around, grind its way down the lane again. Now she listened for Luther as he came into the house. In her mind she followed every step he took to reach his bed, as he undressed and got in between the sheets and pulled the two blankets up over him, shivering in the cold air.

For a moment she felt a quickening anger, but knew she could do nothing more at this moment than worsen the situation by con-

fronting him. Warm tears came into her eyes and she sighed and gave up the battle for the moment. He was home and safe in bed. So much for that. Tired, dulled by her own thoughts, she dozed, then slept.

When the alarm went off at six-thirty she struggled awake, feeling as though she had not been to bed at all. She went into the kitchen to start a fire in the stove and put the coffee on, then another kettle to heat up some water to wash in. She started back to her room, then went farther along the hall to the front room to look in on Luther. He slept soundly, knees drawn up, covers over his head, clothes piled in a tumbled heap on the chair beside his bed, some of it having fallen to the floor. She picked up his shirt and suede jacket and placed them on the chair. How like a child, she thought.

She went back to her room and slipped out of the robe and nightgown, dressed quickly in the early-morning chill. She combed her hair back and tied it with a ribbon until she could wash her face, then comb it out properly. By the time she was finished and had had her second cup of coffee, there would be just time to walk down to the main road to catch the seven-thirty bus that would take her the little over two miles east to the Hall. On a warm, sunny morning, she might have been tempted to walk the distance, had often done so.

She took her cup and saucer to the sink and pumped some water over them. She would have a full breakfast at the Hall that Sudie would fix for her before the day's work began, but she knew it would be easier for Luther if she left the coffeepot at the back of the stove so that all he need do would be to pull it forward and let it heat up.

She finished dressing and pulled on a pair of rubber rain boots and went to the front of the house. This time, as she stopped to look at Luther, his eyes opened and for the moment she was startled.

"Hi, Carrie," he called lightly, his voice slow and sleepy, a smile on his face.

"Hi, honey," she replied softly. "Go back to sleep. I've got to catch my bus."

"Take it easy. See you tonight," he said, closing his eyes again.

"Sure. I'll see you tonight," she answered and went out through the front door, closing it carefully behind her. Unaccountably, the tears came back into her eyes.

Once awake, there was little for Luther to do once he drank his coffee and had taken care of the light chores. He whistled his two dogs, Hoot and Holler, in from the barn, wiped them down with an old towel on the back porch before bringing them into the kitchen to feed. This done, he began to make breakfast for himself. He cut thick slices of bacon and set out four eggs, sliced the bread to toast over the coal fire in the wire holder. He looked in on Jud and decided that since the old man was still asleep, he would not waken him. Life was always so much more pleasant and uncomplicated when Jud was asleep or sitting quietly in his alcoholic half-world.

He came back to the kitchen and dropped the bacon into the pan, listened to its crackling sizzle. Twenty dollars for a single night's work, Luther thought. He put a hand inside his shirt pocket and felt the soft, warm bills. And that was only for helping Dale with the driving. If he could get himself put on the regular payroll, at regular wages, *plus* the monthly bonus for perfect attendance and no accidents, *plus* expenses while on the road, it would come to better than a hundred a week clear! If they let him, he'd drive steadily all six nights of the week, by God, for that kind of money!

Still, he couldn't blame Dale for wanting to cut his work down by splitting the run with Luther. With a wife like Ruth-Rachel he could hardly be blamed for wanting to spend all the time he could with her.

As far back as the eighth grade, he recalled, Ruth-Rachel had had the pleasing virtues of a girl many years older, a certain animal appeal and attractiveness of body and good looks that made boys gravitate to her like a bee to a flower, even at an age when they couldn't have explained why. Later, there had been much speculation and behind-the-hand whisperings about her, talk among the other girls, but no amount of talk had ever prevented the boys from paying her constant attendance during recess periods and after school hours.

Next week, he told himself. By next week he would be taking a run out all by himself. He'd have to skip the trip to Camp Gillespie, since it was an overnight trip and he'd have to go through a big scene with Carrie about it. He didn't want any overnight trips until he was a regular driver. Then he would come home and announce officially to her that he was working for Tam and that would be that. He would give up working around the place here and— He

began to wonder if they could possibly get off this piece of charity land of Marcus Radford's, perhaps rent a house in town. But then the thought of moving Jud into town knocked that idea out of his head quickly. Jud would be much better off out here, away from people.

The bacon was finished and he cracked four eggs into the greasy pan, laid out four slices of bread on the wire holder for toasting, pushed the coffeepot back off the open flame, and replaced the iron lid. If Johnny would put the stamp of approval on him today, Tam might put him on the payroll at once. Jesus! What a cinch job! In no time at all he would be making the runs to Mobile, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and to the various army camps. Haul the sugar in, haul the whiskey out. Protection by the sheriff and nothing to do but drive and draw down good money, expenses, and bonus. If only he could stay out of the draft. So far, he was in a deferred class as a farmer. He counted heavily on that to keep him from being called up by the Selective Service Board.

Hell, he thought, in no time at all he would have his own car, be able to buy things for Carrie, bring presents to her from out of town, get her to smile more often, the way she used to. Get her to go to a beauty shop every week and, by sure God, she'd show most of the town girls up. Yes, sir. Maybe she could start going back to church Sundays again and meet herself a fellow like that Fred Archer who'd once courted her before Jud ran him off.

Money. What a difference it was making in his life already, the feeling of being able to actually walk into a store and buy something instead of standing outside and looking hungrily into a show window; getting a tiny look at a future that was making it worth getting up mornings for. To be able to get away from the dismal chores of this God-forsaken piece of scratched-out land they didn't even own.

He carried the food to the table and began to eat his breakfast with evident enjoyment. He wondered again about Johnny Norris's cryptic remarks about *Mr. Big*, the man who had his hand in the moonshine operation and every other illegal enterprise in the county. It was obvious that Hessie Loomis was fronting for Sheriff Willis Bartly, had heard that part of it himself, but if Bartly was not *Mr. Big*, *then who was?*

He shrugged and let it pass.

Jud Dorman came stumbling out of his room into the kitchen. Luther went to the stove to refill his cup with coffee, brought the pot to the table, knowing Jud would be looking for his morning

eye-opener: half a large cup of coffee, the other half filled with corn whiskey. God only knows what the hell he eats to keep him alive, Luther thought. There was evidence that Jud occasionally rooted around in the icebox, but what was taken seemed hardly enough to keep even a small boy alive. Carrie would fix some soup or soft-boiled eggs for him when she came home, and this he would manage, under her coaxing, with a slice of bread, slopping the one into the other, lifting it to his beard-hedged mouth even as some of the thick semi-liquid stuff dropped on his undershirt or overalls.

Jud lurched toward the table now, steadying himself against the edge of it, eyes bleary and film-coated. He was not a big man, some five feet eight or nine, but he still showed the frame of a once active, heavier man, although now his muscles and flesh were flabby from disuse, his color a sallow, sickly yellow. He was barefooted and wore only the one-piece suit of long underwear, dirtied with food droppings, sleeves caked and shiny with many nose and mouth wipings, open at the neckline and unbuttoned at the crotch. He yawned, leaning against the table while he scratched at his body with both hands.

"At you, Effie? Carrie girl?" he asked in his thick, throaty voice.

Luther looked away from him, ignoring the use of his dead mother's name. "No. It's me. You want some coffee?"

"Yeah. Yeah, half a cup." He turned back toward the hall to go to his room for the bottle to use in filling the other half of the cup. Damn him, Luther thought angrily, if it wasn't for Carrie, I'd just as lief cut him off of his supply of 'shine and see what would happen to him then.

He called after Jud in a loud voice, "And while you're at it, why don't you for Chrissakes put some clothes on?"

From the hallway Jud's equally angry and irritated voice came back. "Who you think you talkin' to, boy? Who the hell give you the right to raise your voice to me?" He lumbered back into the kitchen now, squinting, a bottle in one hand, the other raised accusingly at Luther. "You think you're a man growed, don't you? You think you can talk to your old sick daddy any old way you want? Jest you raise your goddamn voice at me once more and I'll take my strap to your ass and wear it thin!"

It had been a long time since Luther had feared this man and now he turned blazing eyes and full wrath upon Jud. "Listen, you no-good drunken jughead," he shouted, "you go back to your room and put some pants or overalls on and cover yourself when you come into this room, or any other room exceptin' your own. Else

don't come in here at all. You want to run around here half naked like a goddamned animal, you do it in your own room and not in front of me or my sister! You hear that, you—you—!" He had risen from his chair, stood in the middle of the kitchen, knees bent slightly, arms swaying away from his body, fists curled, knowing it would take very little more for him to actually strike this man, and that once he did, he might not be able to control himself beyond that point.

Jud was peering uncertainly at Luther and saw much the same thing. He moved backward, startled, toward the hallway. Luther stood staring him down and then Jud turned, sighed deeply, and went back to his room. When he returned, he was wearing a pair of faded denim overalls, the straps hanging down from his waist, but the front fly was buttoned. He came to the table scratching his unkempt gray hair, gripping the bottle of colorless 'shine in his other fist. "This suit you, Mr. God Almighty?" he asked.

Wordlessly, Luther poured the coffee into the oversized cup his father usually drank from. He wanted to make some retort, perhaps trick Jud into raising his voice again, but as he looked down at his father, he knew it was senseless, hopeless. He put the coffee-pot back on the stove and walked down the hallway to the front room and began to straighten out the bedclothes, two spots of deep color still flaming his cheeks to speak for the anger and annoyance he felt for the man toward whom he could show neither warmth, affection, nor respect; only disgust and contempt.

He's no better than any of those drunken bums who hang out across the railroad bridge in that jungle alongside of the city dump, Luther thought. Niggers in Buckeytown are better men than he'll ever be. And yet he's always the first to scream and curse that the niggers don't know their place.

9.

It was nearing seven that same night. Jud had had his soup and bread spooned into his mouth by Carrie and she had been able to coax him into eating a bit of the meat in it. From the kitchen he had gone directly to his room and they both knew he would be there until morning. If he woke during the night, his bottle would be sitting on the chair within easy reach and he would need no more than that to put him back to sleep again. While she cleared the table and attacked the dishes in the sink, Luther had gone to his front room to change into his "going to town" clothes.

"Be back in a few minutes to dry, Carrie," he said and she knew from his tone that he would be going out again tonight.

His self-assuredness and newly found confidence angered her, brought tears to her eyes; but it was so easy for her to cry now, when she thought of the way he was earning his money. She wondered how he was spending it aside from the few items of wearing apparel he was bringing home; probably throwing it away on the same kind of tramps with whom "the fellows" spent their spare time. He might even end up marrying one of them, the way Dale Hagen had run off with that Ruth-Rachel Pierce. Even she, living all the way out here so far removed from town, knew what kind of a tramp Ruth-Rachel Pierce had been, selling herself night after night to the men she came in contact with at the Golden Palace where she worked, accepting the larger-than-usual tips and then making her choice for the night—the way a stud bull might with so many cows available, or a stallion with a field of mares from which to choose. She wanted more than that for Luther. A lot more. It was so *galling* to stand by and be able to do nothing about the direction in which he was heading.

He came back, dressed warmly, carrying the suede jacket over his arm. He draped it over a chair and came to the sink to dry the already washed dishes. Several minutes passed without a word from either and then both felt a sense of relief when they heard the horn sound. Carrie reached over and took the towel from his hands. "Go ahead, Luther," she said. "You wouldn't want to keep Dale waiting, would you?"

She said it softly, without reproach or anger. He wiped his hands on the towel and let her take it from him. Then with a suddenness, he took her arms into his grasp and drew her close and kissed her.

"We'll be all right, Car," he said. "Don't you worry. I promise you it'll all work out okay."

10.

As they drove into town, Dale's mind turned back to late afternoon when he had seen Ruth-Rachel last, warm, loving, and responsive. He had gotten up finally and gone into the kitchen of the small cottage he had rented from Sam Crittenden shortly after he had returned with his bride from New Orleans. He had known then—and before—that Lutie would never accept Ruth-Rachel, not even if she had been the Queen of England; not any more than Ruth-Rachel would be able to put up with his mother's Bible-

misquoting, her small pickiness when it came to her son and his comfort. And when Lutie began to increase the amount of "tonic" she had to take to soothe her nerves, brought on by their elopement, the situation had worsened.

In that first week Lutie gave up the pretense of filling a pint medicine bottle with white lightning, and began drinking it from the original quart bottle. As her drinking increased, she began to hurl insult after insult at Ruth-Rachel from the moment Dale left the house to go to work. "Town girl" was the first and lightest invective; then "town slut" and finally "town whore"; at which point Ruth-Rachel told Dale she wouldn't live in the same house with Lutie even if they *were* living there room-and-board free; that if he wasn't man enough to walk out and take his wife with him, she was leaving and would take back her job at the Golden Palace.

He packed and left with Ruth-Rachel then, to the insults and curses first on his wife, then upon himself for deserting his mother in her hour of need. "And the Lord sayeth that the bite of a child is more venomous and painful than the sting of a serpent," she cried, "but the Lord will take vengeance on the descendants of such a child in many ways." And, "Do honor unto thy mother, ye sons, lest ye be struck down by God's own hand." And finally, "The Lord hath said he will punish him who will take unto himself a fallen woman and then desert his mother when she needeth him most."

"Listen to that," scoffed Ruth-Rachel. "Now you know well enough there's nothing in the Bible says anything like that."

"I know, honey," Dale replied, "but we got to overlook a lot of things in a woman who's lost the only son left to her. Us getting married like we did gave her a shock she can't adjust to right away. She'll be all right in a while. She'll come around."

"Not around my house, Dale," Ruth-Rachel said emphatically. "I don't want any part of a woman who calls her own daughter-in-law those dirty names."

Poor Lutie, he thought now. She's had her a hard life and I know it only too well. But she'll ease up. Maybe in a little while she'll come to see things different and change. Maybe if we had us a baby, give her a grandchild. Then we might move back to the old house with her and the three of us live in peace there. Lord knows, it would sure cut down the expenses a lot. Takes a lot of money to keep a girl like Ruth-Rachel in the clothes she needs. Maybe it's better Luther can't make the Gillespie run with me tonight. That's twenty dollars more for me. And I can sure use it now.

Chapter 3

1. May, 1945

Master Sergeant Luther Dorman stood nervously beside the President of the United States. Forming a semicircle about them were more than two dozen people, most of them in uniform representing the various branches of military services, the balance in civilian dress: members of the Cabinet, the Congress, and the White House staff. Facing them were the press members and photographers who kept up a rapid fire of flash bulbs as they called out, "One more, please. May we have one more, sir?" and "Please, this way, sir. Would you mind looking this way, Mr. President, Sergeant Dorman?"

Hand-held and tripoded motion-picture cameras murmured and ground away as the President held the light blue, white-starred ribbon with the five-pointed star crested by an eagle atop the bar that read simply: *VALOR*, its green wreath encircling the star upon whose center was engraved the head of Minerva. Luther heard the words that described his act of heroism, in which he was given credit for preventing a heavy loss of American lives as well as unblocking the Gruenwald Road (and by now, few were aware that thirteen men, and not just this one, had participated in that action) that set up the eventual breakthrough and capture of one of the most important sectors in the drive, one in which a total of some 64,000 prisoners were later taken, including General Karl Ronstadt.

Even in his crisp sultan uniform he could feel the heat coming from inside him instead of the close, outer atmosphere of the crowded room and flashing bulbs. In his left hand was the gold-tooled leather case that held a duplicate of the medal that hung from his neck, one to be worn over his left breast pocket. Inside the case, too, was a ribboned bar of light blue watered silk with five white stars upon it, to be worn in place of the neck ribbon or breast medal. Also, there was a small, white-starred blue rosette that he could someday wear in the lapel buttonhole of a civilian

jacket. (Or, as Lieutenant Bledso, who stood just behind him and beside a beaming Lieutenant Claudia Holliman, had suggested in a whisper, "—in one of the buttonholes of your dress overalls." Of course, it had been said jokingly, but at the moment it had struck a jarring note in Luther.)

Luther's rehearsed speech was spoken slowly, carefully, and then the exchange of handshakes between himself and the President was officially recorded on film. The President and his staff, the men from Capitol Hill and the high-ranking military men left, and now the reporters and photographers swarmed about the three of them, Master Sergeant Luther Dorman, Lieutenants Harry Bledso and Claudia Holliman, Luther insisting that they be included in the photographs so that their families would be able to recall this proud moment in years to come. Bledso had taken the leather case from Luther's hand and Claudia, standing closely, protectively beside him, had given him the other cane to hold, with which to steady himself.

When the reporters asked Bledso to identify himself, it was Luther, surprisingly, who took the initiative and introduced him. "This is my good friend, Lieutenant Harry Bledso, out of my own outfit and from my home state. And this is Miss—I mean Lieutenant Claudia Holliman, the best nurse in the whole Army. She's from Boston."

Bledso remained happily in the background, glad he had not been called upon to elaborate further on his current duties. "Sheep dog," he had referred to himself when General Bentley assigned him to stay close to Luther.

"Lieutenant," Bentley had instructed Bledso privately, "I want you to go along with that boy and stay with him every minute, day and night. Don't let anybody misinterpret anything he might say and don't let him get into any mischief that might reflect adversely on our fine state or the Army. Your daddy being a state supreme court justice, I know you've got the tact and ability to see him through this thing until you get him home. After that, you'll be relieved of that duty, with a leave of absence before you return to duty with this division."

And now Bledso stood beside Luther, wondering how much longer he would be performing this temporary duty as shepherd. He glanced toward Claudia and wondered at the softness that lay beneath the hard finish of her uniform, wet his lips as her smile flashed prettily for the photographers, her white, even teeth gleaming brightly in the explosion of light. He had made an effort, but

she seemed to be devoted completely to her patient. What a wonderful thing, he thought, to be able to get into a nice warm State-side bed with her. Regretfully, he decided against any action that might compete with his hero charge.

Luther, bewildered, overwhelmed, and frozen with fright, had stood erectly beside the President, hands gripping the cane that supported him. Claudia had taken the one from his right hand and stood closely beside him for support. The President then placed the medal and blue ribbon around his neck and said some words to him, but Luther had hardly heard the words, seeing only the kind, gentle smile of a fatherly face that wore glasses. He felt the firm, strong handshake and, when his hand was released, remembered to salute with his right hand while the still and motion-picture cameras clicked and ground away and lights flashed hotly and brilliantly all over the place. Other men had shaken his hand, the men in civilian clothes, the men in uniform.

The reporters were more persistent now that the President and other officials were gone. They pressed forward, surrounding Luther and Bledso and Claudia, asking questions that related to the more pertinent and intimate details concerning Master Sergeant Luther Dorman, the nation's most recent hero. Luther was stunned by the crowding, the rapid-fire questioning, unable to separate one question from the other while the exploding flash bulbs and grinding newsreel cameras in the background offered even less reassurance.

The press had been furnished copies of the official citation and a facts-and-data sheet compiled by the White House press secretary, one page of general information taken from available service records. Luther stood dumfounded and bathed in perspiration while Harry Bledso did his best to run interference, trying to furnish answers concerning his limited knowledge of Luther. Claudia did her part to try to shield him from being overrun by the more aggressive newsmen, but was expertly shunted to one side.

And then suddenly, a stern, bespectacled captain came into the room carrying a heavy brief case that he placed upon a table. One or two of the reporters drifted toward him as he began to unstrap his leather case, asked him a few questions which he answered in an orderly and authoritative manner. Within moments, Luther, Bledso, and Claudia had been left to the photographers while the reporters gathered about the captain, who apparently knew everything there was to know about Luther from the time he was born, provided details of his boyhood, schooldays and growth in Regis,

plus the fact that he had voluntarily enlisted on the day following the attack on Pearl Harbor. He examined Luther's military record, his prowess on the range with carbine, M-1 and .45 automatic, having qualified as expert marksman with each. This was a record clean of demerits: no court-martial, no stockade time.

Glibly, the captain related this wanted information and then extracted a handful of 8 x 10-inch glossy prints of Luther's sister, Carrie Dorman, and began to distribute these. On the back of each was a sheet of typed information concerning her: name, height, weight, color of hair, eyes. Then the captain took out another handful of photographs and these were of Jud Dorman, clean-shaven, white-shirted, with striped tie and wearing a neat salt-and-pepper suit, his iron-gray hair combed back and orderly, staring grimly out of a pair of dully glazed eyes. Only Jud's eyes were familiar to Luther as he held the shiny photograph, hearing the captain's sonorous voice, "—of Sergeant Dorman's father, Mr. Judson Dorman, who operates a small farm in Regis."

Almost as suddenly as it had begun, the press conference was over.

2.

A full week before the first White House release concerning Luther Dorman was made public, the news was made known to two men: Gordon Thomas of the Regis daily *Herald* and Marcus Audrey Radford, in that order. It came in the person of the dark-haired, intense captain who was completely businesslike and unsmiling, a man with a job to do and not particularly fond of his assignment.

Captain Joel Harris, an advertising executive in civilian life, had joined the Army early in 1942, eager to serve his country, requested overseas duty; but instead, as often happened, he was given a direct commission and installed in an office in Washington as a public relations and information officer. Despite monthly requests for transfer into infantry, tank, paratroop, air, glider corps, and other branches of fighting service, his requests were returned disapproved by his superior. By 1944 he had given up all hope of ever seeing war-torn Europe or the Pacific. Only one remained: that the war would end soon and he could be demobilized and return to his advertising agency in New York.

When he explained the purpose of his mission to Gordon Thomas, the newsman listened and said contemplatively, "Of course, Captain, I am delighted with the possibilities this offers and will give you

the complete cooperation and assistance of the *Herald* and that of every member of its staff; but I would suggest that we step over and talk to Mr. Marcus Radford first."

"Glad to welcome you to Regis, Captain," Marcus greeted as the two men shook hands. "Have a chair, sir. Cigar? Drink?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Radford," Captain Harris said crisply.

"Now, what can we do for you, sir?" Marcus asked affably. "We'll be glad to help in any way we can. Any way at all."

Harris pulled a sheaf of typewritten matter from his brief case and laid it out on Marcus's desk. "This is going to be the biggest event in the life of this—town—Mr. Radford. As soon as the news breaks nationally, you people down here are going to be literally swamped with newspaper and magazine reporters, photographers, newsreel men, radio reporters, and special features writers."

Marcus smiled. "I don't see much of a problem in that, Captain. I've handled news—"

Harris pursed his lips and frowned. Another goddamned small-town hick who knows everything, he thought. I'd better give it to him as straight and hard as I know how. Maybe this Thomas, who seems to have something on the ball, will go along with me.

"Look, Mr. Radford," he said with a show of deliberate patience, "you're a banker, and from what I've heard, a great political leader in your state. As such, you are a student of public reactions, public acceptance of an idea, and general public or mass psychology. This matter of Luther Dorman is strictly an emotional thing with the public. For your town and its people, it will mean national exposure. For my part, it means presenting an Army hero to the public in his best, most appealing light. We can't afford to let anything unpleasant or distasteful become attached to this boy, however accidentally, while he is under the glare of national publicity. The White House can't afford that, either. Much as you've handled newsmen on a county or state level, this will be nothing like what you've ever seen before."

Marcus frowned slightly, annoyed, but Gordon Thomas nodded almost imperceptibly in agreement. Harris took it from that point. "I'm here to help you. Why don't we make a deal? If you will leave this thing to me, I'll see to it that everybody gets what he wants. The newspaper services, magazines, radio people, and photographers will get what they come for and your community and Luther Dorman will be represented to the nation so that you get the best of it. Everybody stays happy, nobody gets hurt. We've got only

a week in which to work before the release goes out from the White House and the news world descends on you, when they come breaking into your privacy and turn Regis into the goddamnedest turmoil you've ever seen. They'll hit like a Midwestern twister. They'll be everywhere, in the streets, in your homes, among public records, in your hair and teeth. If you let me set this thing up for you, everything will be channeled quietly and it will be easier on everybody."

It was the captain's cocksure manner, more than his words, that irritated Marcus somewhat, being unused to having someone come in and take over. He said bleakly, "You make it sound as though we're trying to put something over on the public, as though something needs to be hidden or covered up. After all, Luther Dorman is a local boy and a national hero. What have we got to hide or be afraid of?"

"Well," Harris replied, "for one thing, there's his father, Jud Dorman. It didn't take me any longer than ten minutes in the railroad station restaurant to find out that Jud Dorman is a hopeless drunk and has been lushing his life away at the expense of a son who has become a public figure and a daughter who is a day worker in some cotton-rich plantation mansion. If I can smoke that out inside of ten minutes, Mr. Radford, think of what the expert bloodhounds and snoops will find out when they're turned loose. It might even be embarrassing for some other people around here."

"In what way, Captain?" Marcus asked with mounting annoyance, no longer taking the trouble to conceal it from his visitor.

"Well, this is a dry state, isn't it? Where does Old Man Dorman get his whiskey ration? Who runs the local stills around here? How much does it cost a day to keep him on a whiskey diet? You got answers for questions like those, Mr. Radford? How about this sister of his, this Carrie Dorman he's got listed as next-of-kin, while he has a father still alive? Is she a nice girl, coming from a family like that? What about her character? These are only a few questions that they'll pick up off the streets, in the alleys, or anywhere they can from people who will naturally want to shoot their mouths off in order to get into the act when they're promised their pictures will be published in all the big papers or magazines or even the news-reels."

"Then," Marcus asked, "how do you propose to keep them from asking the same questions of you, of us, of the people in the streets?"

Harris smiled easily at the thought of possible victory so quickly. "I don't think that part will be too difficult if we work together to organize this thing. The people who come here won't want to linger

any longer than they have to as long as they get plenty of information. For one thing, there aren't too many accommodations here for them. If we can anticipate the material and photographs they want, have it prepared and ready to hand over to them, I'll almost wager they'll be out of here within twenty-four hours. They'll be content to turn their photographers loose on the town for background shots while I tie the rest of them up in one press conference after another. By that time, Luther will be out of Washington on a bond-drive tour and they'll all be hurrying back to where he is to get to him in person. When they do, I'll be there beside him to help him over the hurdles."

Marcus was silently thoughtful for a few moments. He looked up at Gordon Thomas, who nodded his accord with the captain's plan. Finally he gave Harris his decision. "All right, Captain," he said, "I know you want to be helpful and we appreciate your cooperation. We'll play it your way all the way."

They came in by train and car, just as Harris had predicted. They began to swarm over the town, the photographers aiming their cameras at the Square, the buildings surrounding it and the old men sitting on the benches with their checker boards. They took shots from rooftops and out along the roads, the cottages along the Welcome River, recording mansions, shacks, and cabins. When they began stopping people in the streets to ask their questions, they ran into the same answer: "You-all better go see Mr. Thomas at the *Herald*. He c'n tell you all about the Dormans better'n us." It came as a shocking surprise to them that most people didn't even know the Dormans, who lived "'way out on County Road"; and this gave credence to the fact that they were a quiet-living family.

They sought out Luther's former teachers who, coached by Harris, said of him, "A splendid student with a very fine mind. Too bad that financial circumstances prevented him from continuing on. He would have made an—" In the end, they came to see Gordon Thomas and Marcus Radford, who, with Captain Harris, handed out the complete package of photographs and preprinted statements of leading citizens, the mayor, banker and county political leader, minister, county supervisors, and "casual passers-by."

Jud Dorman, when he was taken out almost forcibly for a cleaning up, balked, but Marcus Radford came by to talk with him and he submitted to the haircutting, face-shaving, and two new suits of clothes and shoes. He snarled at Link Trewby's camera and, when the idea finally seeped into his befuddled brain that all this, in some

way, involved Luther, demanded angrily, "What damn kin' a foolishness that boy gotten hisself mixed up with now? What kin' a trouble's he in? I'n got no money to be bailin' him out a no jail. He c'n stay in there an' rot for all a me."

Carrie had cried with dismay at the first word from the War Department that Luther had been wounded, but subsequent news, in the form of a letter from a Captain Wentworth, followed by one from General Robert Cleland Bentley himself, reassured her that he was showing admirable progress rapidly and would not only recover fully, but would most likely be sent home the very moment he was able to travel. And now the news that he was to be decorated . . . When Captain Harris and Marcus Radford told her about Luther's good fortune, she cried with happiness for him and said, "My, my. Luther a real hero. He's a good boy. A real good boy."

Reactions to the news varied as people found difficulty remembering him. One oldster in the Square even said, "Luther Dorman. What's he done now? Wasn't he the one got in trouble a few years back when Sam Trunkert's barn got burned down?" Then reflectively, "No, no, 'twasn't Luther done that. That was the Kelleher boy."

Some remembered him, but not much beyond identification of the name. A few said, "Sure, I know ol' Luther. Used to see him up in the woods huntin' aroun' with ol' Dale Hagen and Robbie Tilebin who used to work for Mist' Marcus." Or, "Glad he's all right. Tough about ol' Dale gettin' killed. Henry Luftin, too. They was real nice boys."

But mostly there was little general knowledge of Luther Dorman, or his father or sister, in town. When the story finally broke that he was on his way back to the United States and would be given the Medal of Honor in the White House, he became almost as well known in Wichita and Minneapolis and Orlando as he was in many parts of Regis.

In the hotel room Luther lay on the wide bed, resting from the arduous ceremony, reading the news accounts, seeing the photographs, trying to remember it as it had really happened, separating the important parts of it from the hubbub and noise that had followed. He saw again the kind, fatherly face of the smiling man who was the President, heard his words distinctly as he presented the Medal. When it was done, a complete silence had filled the room and then Harry Bledso nudged him and Luther spoke the words he had rehearsed with Harry and Claudia for hours the night before,

enunciating each syllable slowly and carefully, even to the sounding of his g's.

"Mr. President," he had responded, "nothing I have ever received in my whole life, nothing I will ever receive in the future, will mean so much to me as this award. I thank you, sir, with sincerity and humility, and in the name of the men who were with me that night, I hope I may be able to live up to its true meaning and worth."

The President had said something serious about the immensity of his act of bravery and the responsibilities that went with the Medal of Honor; and then he added something else about his own experiences during World War I as an artillery captain that made those present laugh; and then it was all over. The President and the others had gone, leaving him there with Bledso and Claudia to face the mob of newspeople and cameras. Then had come the public relations captain to take over the burden of answering the hundreds of questions they were asking, and soon others came into the room to distribute complete packages of mimeographed press releases and photographs.

Later they were driven in a White House car to their rooms at the Statler, Harry Bledso and the captain sharing one room, Luther alone in the room next to theirs, Claudia Holliman in the room next to Luther's, all three connecting. Claudia would enplane for Boston the next morning when her leave of absence would begin, while Luther, Harris, and Bledso would begin their scheduled tour of the nation's most important defense plants to cheer the workers on and help the Treasury Department's War Bond people sell more bonds.

There were packets of messages waiting for him at the Statler, from hundreds of people he had never heard of: several literary agents and magazine editors who wanted to discuss the possibility of publishing his life's story; two representatives of West-Coast motion-picture studios who were interested in filming his own true-life story of what had happened in the black forest on that fateful night of March 17; requests from the major radio networks for appearances before their microphones; independent agents who wanted to represent him in all fields.

Joel Harris had taken the stacks of messages up to their rooms with him while Claudia insisted that Luther get into bed and rest. "I'll take care of these," Harris said.

Bledso, unpacked, came into Luther's room and sat in the easy chair that looked down on the busy street traffic. Harris examined stacks of mimeographed sheets and more photographs of Luther, Carrie, and Jud Dorman, shoved them into his brief case.

"Captain," Luther asked, "how come you know so much about me, about my sister and father and everybody in Regis?"

Harris smiled. "I spent a whole week down there before the press got there. Otherwise it could have been a sorry mess, like the press conference I walked in on at the White House today. By the way, I've arranged for your sister to be at Mr. Radford's home tonight at seven so you can call her there. If you want, you can have her come up here for a few days' visit at the government's expense."

The eagerness showed in him for the first time in days, soon died as he replied, "Thanks, Captain. I want to talk to her right bad, but, like as not, she can't come up here and leave Pa alone."

Bledso asked, "What happens next, Captain?"

"According to the original schedule, Lieutenant, we three will fly out to Detroit, then to Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, then to a welcoming ticker-tape celebration in New York, on to Boston— Well, here's a complete list of the cities for you to look over. Dates, too. No problems at all. I've been over the route before. Here are extra copies of the speeches Luther will make. Two kinds, one for the defense-plant workers we'll be visiting on the job, the other for the civic rallies with the local bigwigs in full view. After each pitch, the Treasury Department people will be there to sell bonds while Luther smiles, shakes hands, autographs their books or slips of paper or whatever. I've kept the speeches short, like the wind-up thing to the bond buyers when he says, 'Thank you. You're doing as much as any soldier at the front, men who are heroes every day of the year.'"

"Does Miss—uh—Lieutenant Holliman go along with us?" Luther asked.

Harris shook his head. "No, she doesn't. When we leave for Detroit tomorrow morning, Lieutenant Holliman will board a civilian plane for Boston for a nice leave of absence before she returns to duty."

The thought that they would be separated depressed Luther somewhat and his face showed his transparent feelings. Claudia put her hand over his and pressed it hard.

"Well, then, when do I get home, Captain?" Luther asked. "I'd sure like to see Carrie. I haven't seen her since I left home the day after Pearl Harbor."

Harris said, "If you want her to come up, we can postpone our starting date for a couple of days, but since you say she can't leave your father, I would guess you'll be back in Regis in about four or five weeks. Both you and Lieutenant Bledso. Then Bledso will leave you there and go on to his home for a leave of absence."

Bledso squirmed in his chair, stood up, and came over to take a cigarette from the packet on the night table beside Luther. "We'll make it in time, Luther," he said with a smile. "We'll have us a high old time when we hit Regis."

Luther turned back to Captain Harris. "You meet Mr. Marcus Radford in Regis, Captain?"

Harris smiled. "I met him. He's quite a big man, isn't he?"

Luther nodded. "You meet Miss Bethann Radford?"

He felt Claudia's hand tighten on his, then she got up and moved away from the bedside and went to her own room, leaving the connecting door open.

Harris said, "I did meet his daughter once while having dinner at his home. A tall, beautiful blonde girl. Cute little daughter she has. I forget the little one's name—"

"Harriet," Luther finished. "She look like her mother any?"

"The very image."

Claudia came back into the room just as someone knocked. She went to the door to admit the waiter with the supper she had ordered sent up for Luther by room service. She placed it on the table beside his bed and said to Bledso and Harris, "Luther is going to have his dinner now, then turn in for a while. I'll wake him at—what time did you arrange for him to make the call to his sister, Captain, seven?"

Harris nodded.

"At seven, then. If this is my last night as his nurse, he's going to get a full night's sleep. If you gentlemen want to take the night out, help yourselves."

"How about you, Claudia?" Bledso asked.

"I'm going to stay until my patient is fast asleep, and when he is, I'll be in my room with the door open so I can hear him if he calls."

Bledso nodded and winked to Harris. "If he doesn't call," he said, "let me know, will you?"

"Why, Lieutenant?" she asked.

"So that I can," Harry Bledso replied and turned to accompany the smiling captain to their own room.

At seven o'clock Claudia woke Luther and handed him the phone to take the call she had placed some minutes before. He spoke to Carrie for fifteen or twenty minutes and outlined the schedule he would be on during the next four or five weeks, promising to let nothing keep him from returning to Regis beyond that final day.

"You take good care of yourself, Luther," Carrie admonished. "I'm doing that. The Army's taking real good care of me, Carrie," he told her. "I'll see you as soon as I can." He hesitated, wanting to ask after Bethann and Harriet, but decided against it. He heard Carrie saying "Good-by, Luther," and handed the receiver to the slip-clad Claudia to put back on the night table. She did so and said, "Are you all right now, Luther? Is there anything else I can do for you?"

He stared at her and his eyes coursed down the curved lines of the light, shimmering material of the slip she was wearing, then turned his back to her and said, "Thanks, Claudia. I'm all right, I guess."

At nine o'clock he heard the phone ring in Claudia's room. It rang five times and stopped. He had no way of knowing that she had begun to pick up the receiver, then decided against it, knowing somehow it would be Harry Bledso. The last time it rang, she had lifted the receiver and held it, heard his voice saying, "Hello. Hello. Claudia?" She did not answer, and then she heard the click when he hung his receiver up, and replaced her own. She saw the light from the bed lamp in Luther's room come on, and she listened and heard the sparking wheel of his cigarette lighter strike. She lay in the darkness of her own room in silence, then heard him as he turned and stirred in his bed.

"Are you all right, Luther?" she called softly

"You up, Claudia?" he called back.

"Yes." She got off her bed, slipped a light robe over her nightgown, and came into his room. She heard his soft gasp as she came into the light, her ample breasts thrust forward against the soft material of her nightwear, obviously unaware of the effect this picture had on him. She went to him and took the pillow from beneath his head, fluffed it up professionally, and replaced it beneath him. He took her hand then, held it tightly. She sat down on the bed beside him.

"I'm going to miss you like all hell, Claudia," he said.

"I'll miss you, too, Luther," she replied. "Very much."

"When we get to Boston in a couple of weeks, can I get to see you then? Maybe I'll be able to slip away from my two watchdogs so we can spend a little time together."

She smiled and nodded. "If you want to, of course we can."

He put the back of her hand to his lips, kissed it, then turned it over and kissed her palm and wrist. He heard the soft intake of her breath as she pulled her hand away from his grasp.

"Claudia," he said in a low tone that asked a full and potent question with the one word. She remained silent, her hands clasped together lightly.

"Claudia," he said again.

"No. No, Luther," she replied in a low voice, almost a whisper. "Please. I—I'm sorry." She rose suddenly from the bed, turned, and went through the connecting door into her own room.

This time she closed the door.

In the morning Luther was wakened by a light rapping on the locked communicating door between his room and the one occupied by Bledso and Harris. He lay in his bed, eyes opened, wondering if the rapping would cease if he did not reply. He heard it once more and then it stopped. He looked at his watch. Six-thirty.

The next time he woke it was twenty minutes past seven and now it was Claudia who stood beside his bed shaking him lightly, smiling down at him. She was dressed in her crisp uniform and when he had said, "Good morning, Claudia," the rapping on the other door began again. Claudia went to it and unlocked it. Bledso came into the room, dressed but for his khaki blouse and necktie. He looked at Claudia with a quizzical, almost accusing look, then came to the bed. Somewhere between the door and the bed, the joviality seemed to have drained away from him.

"You need any help, Luther?" he asked. "We'd better get going and have our breakfast downstairs. The motor-pool car will be here to pick us up at nine. Plane leaves at nine-forty. Claudia's plane goes at ten-twenty-five, so we can take her out to the airport with us if she wants." He turned to Claudia. "Okay with you?"

"Thank you," she said. "Breakfast is on the way up. I ordered it a half hour ago. For you and Captain Harris, too."

"Very efficient, I must say," Bledso replied.

Luther was gathering his shaving gear, heading for the bathroom. "I'll be out in fifteen minutes," he said, closing the bathroom door behind him.

3. June, 1945

Harris was right. It was a hard, grueling tour with a new city almost every day, an occasional day off to allow Luther to rest, each day not unlike the one before. Neither Bledso nor Luther could believe there were so many factories contributing to the over-all war effort. There would be the greeting at the airport by the mayor and members of the city council and other luminaries, pictures for the

local press, the drive into town, a civic luncheon, visit to a major defense plant, more pictures, a minor speech, pictures, sale of bonds, with Luther shaking hands with the buyers, the autographing. Back to the hotel, shower, pack, on to the next city in the Air Corps plane, check into another plush hotel, and begin the entire routine over again. Only once did Luther protest, saying, "For Chrissakes, can't a guy even get a chance to go to a movie?"

"You can't do that, Luther," Harris protested. "You're too big a man to go walking down the street by yourself to buy a ticket for a movie just like anybody else. You just can't do it. Besides, there isn't time on the schedule for it. You wait until you get back to Regis. Then there'll be lots of time for movies and other things as well."

When they reached Boston on a Thursday, however, Luther was adamant. "I don't give a good goddamn what happens to the tour, Captain," he said. "I'm tired. Just plumb wore thin and caving in. I need some rest and I'm going to lay over here for a few days. You can go ahead right now and change the schedule or court-martial me if you want to, but I'm staying right here for the whole weekend. Come Monday, we'll move on."

His sudden angry burst of defiance startled Harris until Bledso took him to one side and explained about Claudia Holliman. Harris's eyebrows went up as his mouth tightened in understanding. "Well, I'll be damned," he said by way of explanation. "And all the time down there in Washington I thought it was you who was getting to her. You never know, do you, Harry?"

"Anyway, Captain," Bledso argued, "let's give him the unscheduled Friday, Saturday, and Sunday he's going to take anyhow. He's been pretty damned cooperative so far, and just between you and me, I don't think I could have taken half this hero crap this long. Besides, maybe you and I can slip down to New York for the weekend. I don't suppose your wife would mind putting up with you for a few days. I'm sure he'll be here when we get back Sunday night."

Harris smiled and saluted Bledso happily. "Lieutenant," he said, "your well-placed and carefully thought-out argument has convinced me. Hell, this is my third hero assignment and I'll give Luther this much: he's been less of a pain in my ass than any of the others."

And so Luther spent three quiet but all-absorbing days and nights with Claudia Holliman of Boston. His visit included a meeting with her family at a small dinner at her home in a well-to-do section of Boston. The traditional New England house was large, beautifully

furnished, and homey. Mrs. Holliman was a sedate, smiling, motherly woman, and Luther felt at ease with her immediately, driving out the fear that came over him when Claudia first stopped the car and announced that this was the home in which she had been born and in which they were going to have dinner with her mother and father. It was with Mrs. Holliman that he became warm with an unaccountable feeling of kinship. George Holliman was at first flinty, scrutinous, and unbending, but when Claudia's sister Lucille and two younger brothers, George, Jr. and Robert, took to Luther so completely, George, Sr. warmed up under his third glass of sherry and lost his cautious reserve. While Luther washed up for dinner, George Holliman went to Claudia's room and she saw at once what was worrying him.

She put a hand along her father's cheek and said, "Don't look at me that way, Dad. This isn't a romantic association and we have no intention of letting it get serious. It's simply that I was his nurse and he made it possible for me to make the trip back to the States. When he leaves on Monday morning, that will be the last I will see of him."

George Holliman smiled then, said with relief, "It's all right, Claudia, if you say so. David has been asking for you ever since you left, and Mother and I still have hopes that you—"

"We'll see, Dad. We'll see as soon as the war is over in the Pacific and I come home for good."

Luther had quietly engaged a room on the floor above the suite he was to occupy with Bledso and Harris. When he learned that Harris was taking Bledso off to New York with him for the weekend, he canceled the extra room. He phoned Claudia, who drove to the hotel to take him home for dinner with her family. They had left the house at a little past nine o'clock and drove slowly back to the downtown hotel where Claudia parked the car and they sat and smoked a cigarette. This was Friday night, his first of complete freedom from his two "wardens," and he and Claudia both laughed over his description of Bledso and Harris.

"They're not very attentive wardens at that, leaving you all alone for the weekend. I think you might have enjoyed a weekend in New York," she said.

He glanced at her quickly, saw the smile that accompanied the remark. "Not unless you were there with me," he replied.

"A very diplomatic and complimentary answer," she said.

"I mean it, Claudia."

She laughed lightly. "I'm sure you do."

She stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray and he threw his out of the window into the gutter. "How about coming in for a few minutes?" he urged.

She pursed her lips prettily, her upturned nose wrinkling at the same time. "I don't think I should, Luther."

"Why not? Come on, Claudia. It's early. I've got some Scotch and a bottle of Canadian whiskey in the room. I can get some ice and soda sent up, anything you want, and—"

She turned to face him, and when he saw the serious look, his voice fell away so that he couldn't finish the sentence. "Okay, Claudia," he said. "I know when I'm licked. I'll go now. Good night." He turned toward the door, pulled the handle up, and it swung open.

"Luther," she began.

He was out of the car and the door was closed again. He leaned down and put his head through the opening. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

She said, "Luther, let me explain—"

"Nothing to explain, Claudia. Besides, I feel tired. I've been up since early morning and I need the sleep. Will I see you tomorrow?"

"I'll call you," she said. "How about eleven?"

"Eleven is fine. And thanks for the dinner. I think you've got a swell family."

They went on a picnic the next day and Luther was back at the hotel by nine-thirty. On Sunday they took a boat out on the Charles River, taking turns at the oars, drifting much of the time. And during those two days it seemed that there had never come an opportunity for them to talk, although they were alone most of the time. No matter how he tried to guide the conversation toward themselves, she managed to veer it in another direction. And on Sunday night when they returned to the hotel, he said to her, "Listen. I want to talk to you and for two days something's always gotten in the way. How about coming up with me now for just long enough to talk something out? If you don't want to, just say so and we'll call it quits right here. But don't just stall me."

"What do you want to talk about, Luther?" she asked.

"You and me. Us."

"What about us?"

"Well—I—is this—all there's going to be after all these months, just a handshake and good-by?"

"What else do you want there to be, Luther? Do you want me

to go upstairs and go to bed with you? If that's what you mean by more than 'a handshake,' I'm sorry. I like you, yes. I'm very fond of you, too, but—but—I don't love you, Luther, and even if I did, I don't believe in promiscuous love-making. I—I—"

He said, "That's not what I wanted to talk about. I wanted to ask how you—felt—about—about—"

She shook her head. "Don't say it, Luther. Please."

"Then this is the end of it? There won't be any more?"

She looked directly at him and he could see the beginning of the tears. "How can there be, Luther?" she said. "We're so far apart, you and I. After the first excitement wears off, where would we be? Here in Boston where you'd feel completely out of place? Or in Regis where I would be the Yankee intruder? We'd have so much against us in either place. All we had were these few months. I can't see how there can be any more than that, can you?"

"A few months is a hell of a short lifetime," Luther said.

"That—that's all it could ever be. A short lifetime. It's over, Luther. I'm sorry I can't make more out of it for you. I hope you'll understand and forgive me."

He nodded and started to get out of the car. She put out a hand and caught at his sleeve, moved closer to him. He turned back toward her, kissed her upturned lips lightly, then pulled away quickly and got out of the car, feeling completely exhausted as he walked across the pavement and took the salute of the doorman who opened the doors for him.

4.

They had lived closely together, these three men, for almost five weeks, and the amazing thing about it, Bledso thought, was that he and Harris were still on the friendliest terms. There was a special comradeship between himself and Luther that, he knew, stemmed from the fact that they had been together, however briefly, in the same military unit, and this at once excluded Harris and stamped them as "buddies" and transcended any acquaintanceships he had made since their return from England together. Luther looked to Bledso for guidance more than to the captain, who each night meticulously laid out their schedule for the following day. Harris, the methodical organizer and front man to press and public. Bledso, the constant companion to make Luther feel more at home, giving him the feeling that "one of his own" was with him, to protect him from the unknown. And Luther, the man on exhibition, sometimes moody,

often morose with a mysterious worry that seemed to elude his two companions.

"What the hell's biting him, do you know?" Harris asked. "It isn't as if he'd been put on a dirty k.p. or latrine detail. Here the government shows its gratitude for his moment of greatness, takes him out of the lines for a soft Stateside duty. Chances are he'll never even get out to the Pacific. The war is just about over for him and all he does is sit around and brood. Didn't he ever learn to smile or horse around, take a joke and give one? Jesus, it's like herding a cow around, for all the emotion he shows."

Bledso had smiled and said, "Let him be, Joel. You're probably up against a problem you don't understand."

"Well, if you do, I wish you'd let me in on the secret," Harris replied. The phone rang at that moment. It was one of the newspaper people he had tried to contact earlier.

It will be over soon, Harris contemplated with satisfaction. Let it end in the Pacific and let me get out of this rat race and back home. All they'd let me give up for my country was time, and I don't want to seem ungrateful, but if I can't be doing a useful thing, I don't want to be doing anything at all except become a civilian again.

The single thing that pleased him about his wartime duty was the experience he had gained in contacting newspaper and radio reporters, editors and feature writers, an experience that would be helpful to him if he decided he would inaugurate a public relations department in conjunction with his advertising agency and concentrate some personnel and effort in that increasingly important and lucrative direction.

Bledso, on the other hand, was pleased to be back in the States, probably a full two or three months before his unit would be sent back. Once he delivered Luther into friendly hands in Regis, he would be free to go on a long, relaxing leave at home, with family and friends in Chancellor. By the time another month or two would pass, perhaps— Who knew? The Washington rumor that Japan might fall soon, now that the European war had collapsed, could well be true. With heavy transfers of troops and equipment, it might all be over within six or eight months. And then?

Luther's emotions were as tangled and twisted as the coils of barbed wire he had seen strung around the thousands of Italian and German prisoners he had helped guard in Africa and Italy. While Bledso and Harris killed time with their pleasant little discussions and arguments and ideologies on the subjects of philosophy, psy-

chology, religion, politics, literature, the Army attitude, the next war—and Harris was certain there would be one with Russia or China in the future—Luther quietly pondered his own personal future. It was as though he were living in a kaleidoscope that took another turn each day and came up with another city, another hotel; strange, seething crowds around him, tumbling past and future together in one huge, whirling drum, solving none of his problems, revealing nothing of what might lay ahead in the months or years to come.

He would lie on his bed trying to think out what would happen to him when the fuss and furor of this trip died down and he would be standing in its final dust wondering where to pick up his life. In the next room that Bledso and Harris shared, he could hear their voiced thoughts and theories as they sought to remake mankind in some form of idealistic relationship. During these discussions faces would appear before Luther's eyes: Jud's spike-bearded face, flabby-skinned neck, the perpetual frown as he tried to focus his alcohol-affected eyes on some object or person. When he managed to get past Jud's face, Carrie's image would take its place, and he would dwell on her sunny, open smile when she had little enough to smile over. When this picture would fade into the background, the vision of Bethann Radford would take over the screen in his mind; and always there was Dale Hagen, strong, handsome, battle-wise and hardened, the light smile of confidence written over him—Dale Hagen, his friend whom he had killed there in that black, frightening forest of terror, turning wife into widow, with a son to raise and support. It was becoming increasingly difficult, as each day passed, to bring Claudia back into his daydreams, to relive their last days together, so quietly and coldly decisive had been their parting.

He dozed. Dale's grinning, death-struck face intruded and began to speak meaningless words from the rim of the machine-gun nest, but they were muffled badly and he could not make them out. He struggled back into the safety of wakefulness, realized that the words he heard were coming from the next room. He breathed deeply with relief, then lit a cigarette and lay in the dark listening to the soft, almost songlike cadence of Bledso's voice as he spoke to Harris.

"Why don't you, Joel?" he asked. "This tour doesn't have to end for you in Washington unless you want it to. You could come down to Regis with us until it's all over, then come on up to Chancellor and spend a few days with the Bledsoes. I know the judge and my mother will be happy to show you a different side of Southern hospitality."

Harris said, "I don't think so, Harry, much as I appreciate your invitation. I spent a whole week in Regis, setting the shebang up before the reporters invaded the town, and everybody acted as though Sherman and his boys were taking over again. I talked with the local Caesar, Marcus Radford." Harris laughed. "He hid Luther's old man out on me for a day or two until they could get the old boy dunked in a washtub for a bath, give him a shave, haircut, and get some decent clothes on him for the photographs. He's obviously an old, true-blue alcoholic. The sister's not a bad-looking chick when she's dressed up and has had a beauty-parlor treatment, and I'd guess that this Radford has more than a passing or paternal interest in her, the way he's taken over the Dorman family and Operation Hero. No, Harry, I don't want to go back to Regis for any reason. Maybe someday, if your invitation to Chancellor holds up— Or you might be coming back to New York for some reason and we can get together then."

Luther squirmed in his bed, angered by Harris's innuendo that linked Carrie with Marcus Radford. He wanted to spring out of bed and face him, deny the accusation. Let it be, he thought finally. I'll be home soon and then the hell with Harris, the Yankee son-of-a-bitch. Who the hell needed or wanted him, anyway?

He lit a second cigarette from the first one and lay in the dark listening. "No," the captain was saying, "this stint ends in Washington for me. Three times I've had to do this same thing, and, frankly, I'm about fed to the teeth with doing this kind of a job while there's shooting going on." He laughed again. "Funny how I've bitched my head off for nearly three and a half years to get into combat; and I know damned well that if suddenly, tomorrow morning, I got my orders to go over and start shooting and get myself shot at, only the laundryman would know how scared I'd be. I guess I'm one of the few guys who got soft in the Army instead of toughened up. Besides, I've got an idea this thing is going to fall apart in the Pacific soon. With most of the European troops and equipment, planes and ships switching to the Pacific, I don't think the Japs are going to be able to withstand the push and pressure. I think now that I'd rather be on this side of the world when it ends."

"So you're going to quit us for Washington," Bledso said.

"That's about it, buster. I want to be close to New York when it's over, no more than a few hours away from my wife and three kids. And my agency."

Luther turned over and buried his face in his pillow, covered his ears to drive away the sound of their voices.

It did not make the situation easier for Luther to realize that these men, whom he could look upon as friends from time to time, were actually trying to get an unpleasant job over with—the unpleasant job of guiding and guarding him through one day into the next until the tour would be over. While Harris was out making the rounds of the newspapers and radio stations, telephoning to make endless arrangements for receptions and speeches and such, Luther tried to talk with Bledso, but it always ended up with his having the feeling that Bledso, only a few years older than himself, somehow regarded him as a child.

One morning after breakfast, when there were three hours to kill before a luncheon meeting, Luther blurted out suddenly, "A man can't help all the things he does, can he, Lieutenant?"

Bledso looked puzzled, turned away to light his cigarette, turned back and replied, "That all depends, Luther. There are certain things he can control. There are others, possibly, that he can't. Just what 'things' are you talking about?"

"Just—well, just *things*."

"I'm afraid I can't help unless you're more explicit, Luther. If you could give me an example of what you mean, perhaps."

"Well, hell, it stands to reason, don't it? A man's got nothing to say about being born or how long he'll live or the way or time when he dies, does he? What do you call that?"

Bledso shrugged. "One name for it might be Fate. Another could be Divine Guidance."

"That's what I mean. So couldn't it be the fault of Fate or this Divine Guidance that one man is poor and another man is rich, one is a sharecropper and the other is a planter, one man lives in a shack and the other one in a big mansion? Why ain't it Fate that makes a man think what he thinks and do what he does?"

"First of all, Luther, you're forgetting some of the things I've been trying to teach you these past weeks. Drop the ain't. When you feel the word coming up, say to yourself—"

"I know. 'There ain't no such word as ain't.' I'll try to remember."

At that moment the door opened and Captain Harris entered, tossed his bulging brief case on a chair. "Ran into my man in the lobby, so I don't have to go all the way downtown to the paper. We'll leave here about eleven-fifteen and—" He looked from Bledso to Luther. "I didn't interrupt anything private, did I?"

"No," Bledso said. "We were about to get involved in a discussion

concerning man's responsibility for the decisions he makes, the things he does or doesn't do, and such. Would you like to get into this one, Joel?"

"Sure, why not? What else have we got to do until eleven-fifteen? Just cue me in so far."

Bledso quickly brought him up to date on the discussion. "You want to take it from there, Joel?"

Harris said with a smile, "Okay, I'll try. Although it strikes me that this is generally a subject that comes to men a few years older than either of you." He swung around to face Luther. "Luther, you're trying to make yourself sound like a dyrd-in-the-wool fatalist, but there's a loose nut or bolt somewhere in your reasoning. The Bible tells us that God made man in His own image and gave him dominion over all other forms of life. He made man a superior being by giving him a brain with which to reason intelligently, and when He did that, He knocked your argument ass-over-tin-cup, if you will excuse the unecclesiastical expression, because that was the exact moment when man became responsible for his own deeds and actions, able to distinguish wrong from right.

"Your form of fatalism, the kind that says, 'Fate made me steal that money from my employer' or 'Fate made me stab or shoot this man' or again 'Fate made me desert my wife and three children to run off with a half-naked strip artist' is the most convenient form of escape from responsibility that man has so far been able to devise for himself. It's the kind that lets a ruthless son-of-a-bitch do as he damned well pleases, to cheat and rob and steal and kill and rape because he's sold himself on that same kind of fatalistic attitude, the healing salve for his conscience, or what passes for one. Fortunately, we have laws and judges and women and men with intelligence and honesty and morals and consciences to offset the other by far, and they are the ones that make life tolerable for the majority. Does any of that make sense to you?"

Bledso sat nodding in agreement, smiling faintly. Not so Luther, who got up and was pacing the floor while Harris talked, his face clouded with disagreement, unwilling to accept this explanation, trying for some way in which to answer Harris with logic or justification he could not command.

"I still say a man ain't—isn't—responsible entirely for everything he does. Just like—well, just like we were told that all men are created equal. If we were and we lived that way, things would be simple." He paused in his pacing, with a new gleam of triumph in his eyes. "Equal," he repeated. "If we were, then I would of finished

high school and gone to college the way both of you did. Equal. And every time I see a nigger down home, I know that equality is nothing but another damn lie. Just like I'm a private who got lucky and made master sergeant, and you—" to Bledso—"are a lieutenant, and you—" swinging around to Harris—"are a captain. Equal?" Luther laughed. "I got a sweet picture of me being equal to Marcus Radford, by God!"

Harris was studying Luther soberly, almost clinically. Bledso sat staring at him through the smoke he expelled from the cigarette that hung between his lips. Luther, encouraged by their silence, continued. "Equal? I was born son to a sharecropper and handyman and raised up the same way. Poor white trash. Just one notch up from a Buckeytown nigger. Equal? I had to quit school to scratch and chore twenty-two acres of limestoned land while you and you were getting your fine educations to be businessmen and lawyers and officers and gentlemen. I never made a cent for myself until just before the war when—when—" Dale Hagen's face came before him now—"Dale Hagen got me a job helping to truck moonshine around. Now Fate, or whatever you want to call it, comes in and gives me this—" He pointed to the pale blue Medal of Honor ribbon over his breast pocket. "And then suddenly, I'm important. Private room in an Army hospital, special nurses, special plane to bring me back to the States, visiting at the White House with the President of the United States, by God! touring around like a prince, eating the best food in the best hotels and homes, drinking the finest whiskey.

"In a little while, maybe ten days, it'll all be over. Then what? What the hell is Fate going to do then? You'll both go home and take up where you left off. Me? I'll go back to Regis to do what? Be a drunken sharecropper's son again? Drive a moonshine truck? What happens to people like me, Lieutenant? Captain?"

The bitter fury in him died as suddenly as it had come alive, and Bledso and Harris sat staring at him, stunned into silence at this sudden and passionate outburst, knowing a little better now the extent of Luther's personal turmoil, the reason for his protracted silences during these weeks of travel and living together, seeing in his two companions that which he yearned to be, knowing and despising the life to which he was destined to return. Both wondered what words they could speak to lessen his anguish, feeling pity and compassion for this young man who stood making a desperate appeal for equality, feeling unfit for the new world he had so recently discovered.

Luther sat down on the edge of the bed, knowing that he had touched these two men deeply, now able to see what they felt for him. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant, Captain. I didn't mean to shoot my mouth off like that."

"Sure you did, Luther," Bledso said quietly, "and I don't blame you a bit, even though I can't give you the answer to your particular problem. Except that you've got to remember it wasn't God who said all men were created equal. That was a man-made, man-voiced dictum, and man is a lot more fallible than God."

Luther smiled with a faint bitterness. "Hell, let it go. I don't understand it, either, but it's my problem. Not yours. Not anybody else's. You do something right, okay. You do something wrong, you're the one has to live with it. Or try to."

"It'll work itself out, Luther, if you give it a chance. Whatever it is," Harris said somewhat helplessly. "Just take it easy."

Luther said, "Nothing works itself out, Captain. You got to work out your own problems in your own way as best you can. And I'll work my own out in the only way I know how. I've seen enough to know that a man has got to make his own way and his own luck in this world. Some get it left to them and some work for it and some marry it, steal it, or get it some other way."

"Well, don't you guys feel too bad about it. It ain't your fault, either of you, that I never had the same kind of breaks you did. I'll get by somehow, but I'll tell you one thing: I'm going to do all right and you can bet your last shirt on that. Old Lady Fate gave me something to work with finally." He touched the watered silk ribbon over his breast pocket. "And one way or another, I'm going to milk everything I can out of it; by sure God, I am."

6.

For the balance of the tour, the pressure eased up, perhaps because the pattern was the same each day and Luther was becoming accustomed to it. Mostly, he kept his personal thoughts to himself now, and when the day was finished and they had eaten their final meal, he would be exhausted and get into bed; but sleep seldom came easily. He would lie with eyes wide open, willing himself to think of other things than the guilt that lay so close to him: the trip back to the States on the plane; his short-lived romance, if it could be called that, with Claudia; the excitement and exhilaration of each new day, the sea of faces looking up at him, women with their hair bound in bandannas, wearing protective face masks pushed back over their heads, in overalls, carrying tools he thought only men

knew how to use; seeing the planes and tanks and tractors and guns they produced; the men and women of all ages who pressed forward with an apparent, but subdued, hysteria, to shake his hand or push a slip of paper toward him to autograph, somehow identifying him with a son or husband or lover who was far away fighting in a distant land; the kindly man who had put the medal around his neck, the simple dignity expressed in his face there in the greatest of all mansions, the White House.

And finally there was still home and Carrie and Jud and Bethann and Harriet. Before that horrifying night, his dreams generally came to an end at that point, but now the nightmarish dream of Dale persisted with greater frequency, and when he would finally manage to push this aside, the end result of his act would claw and tear into his mind: Lutie Hagen, Ruth-Rachel and her son. He would have to face them, he knew, but how? How would he be able to do that and not give himself away? And even if he could manage it, how would he be able to live with himself? He couldn't tell them. They could never begin to understand. He couldn't tell Carrie, either. Nor Bethann.

A montage of faces whirled about him, the crowds everywhere, calling, waving, throwing bits of paper. *If they knew! If they only knew*, he kept repeating, beating a clenched fist into his pillow, *they'd haul me out by a rope around my neck and string me up on the nearest lamppost!*

And then, finally, they were back in Washington and it was all over. He would be going home within a day or two. There was no fuss this time, no welcoming parade as they came into Andrews Field across the river from the National Airport and were driven to the Statler in an Army car. Captain Harris made a phone call to the Pentagon, then went off in the car on official business, no doubt to file a final report of their tour and close it out. Bledso called a girl he had met during their first visit here five weeks earlier and invited Luther to accompany them, promising him there would be a date for him.

"No, Lieutenant," Luther begged off. "You go right ahead. I'm tired. I'll be all right here."

"It's early, Luther. I promise we won't be out too late. Besides, I don't like to leave you by yourself."

"You go along, Lieutenant. I don't mind being by myself. I've got to start being on my own sometime. After all the crowds I've seen and been mixed up with, it does me good to be alone."

Bledso left. Immediately, Luther picked up the phone and gave the operator the Boston number. He replaced the receiver to wait eagerly for her to call him back. He lay on the bed with his hands clasped together behind his head, the blood pounding inside him with anticipation, recalling to mind that this was the same feeling of inner excitement he had experienced when he would lie out in the woods in the bone-chilling early-morning cold of winter, waiting for a deer to come along the run, breathing lightly to keep himself warm without motion as he listened to the rustling leaves in the wind. He would try once again to talk to Claudia, try to convince her— He stubbed out the cigarette and reached for another just as the phone rang. He turned quickly on the bed and grasped the receiver expectantly.

"Sergeant Dorman?" It was a man's voice, totally strange to him.

"Yes?"

"My name is Charlie Tickner, Starlight Productions in Hollywood. I'd like to come up and talk to you for a few minutes. This might come as a good-sized windfall for you and—"

"What about, Mr. Tickner?"

"Charlie's the name, Sergeant. Listen, you ever hear of another sergeant name of York and what—?"

Wearily, Luther said, "Mr. Tickner, I'm no movie—"

"You don't have to be, boy. You just put yourself in my hands and that's it. You're in. Only you got to move fast because right now you're hot as you'll ever be and—"

Luther replaced the receiver. Within five minutes it was ringing again. This time it was Bledso.

"Luther, this girl wants to meet you and she tells me she has a friend who could join us in ten minutes. How about coming down and have a drink and a bite with us? I'm still in the lobby."

Disappointed, Luther said, "I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but I'm just about joe-d, undressed and ready to go to sleep."

"Okay, Luther," Bledso said resignedly, "it's your loss."

He hung up and lit another cigarette, finished it and lay back on the pillow, and the usual daydream began unrolling itself before him: Carrie, Jud, Bethann, Harriet, Dale— The phone rang again and he looked at his watch before lifting the receiver. It was seven-thirty and rain was coming down heavily outside.

The operator said, "On your call to Boston, sir, Miss Claudia Holliman is not at home, but Mrs. Holliman will be glad to take any message."

"No. No, never mind," Luther replied.

The operator said, "Shall I try again, sir?"

Then he heard another voice and recognized it as Mrs. Holliman's. "Is that Sergeant Dorman?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Luther replied.

"I'm afraid—" the operator broke in.

"It's all right, operator," Luther said, "I'll talk to Mrs. Holliman."

"Very well, sir. Go ahead." The operator signed off.

"Luther, how are you?"

"Fine, Mrs. Holliman. How are you?"

"Very well, Luther. I'm sorry Claudia isn't home."

"Is she still in town? She hasn't gone back to duty, has she?"

"No, she hasn't. She has almost three more weeks of leave. Luther, I know she would want me to tell you this since you two are such good friends."

"Tell me—what?"

"Claudia and an old friend of the family—I'm sure she must have told you about him—David Kennard—are going to be married on Sunday."

"Claudia—*married*—this—Sunday?"

"Yes. I thought you might know about it already. There was a piece about it in most of the Boston papers yesterday. I thought perhaps you'd seen it and were calling to congratulate her. She's out with David and his parents at dinner."

"Oh. I see," Luther said dully.

"I—I'm sorry—Claudia isn't home, Luther, but I'm sure you understand that she would be busy getting ready for the wedding. She'll be busy right up—to—the last—minute."

"Sure. Sure, Mrs. Holliman," Luther said. "Listen, you give Claudia my best—uh—wishes. You tell her for me that I'll be going back to duty, maybe to the Pacific in a day or so, and I won't be able to call her. Or write."

"I'll tell her, Luther, and thank you for calling. I know she will be sorry she missed your call."

"Sure," Luther replied. "Sure. Okay, Mrs. Holliman. Good-by now."

"Good-by, Luther." There was the click and it was all over now. No matter what he had thought or dreamed about any future with Claudia Holliman of Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A., that dream was shattered into millions of small pieces now and the miles between them widened beyond recall.

He lay back on the bed now, one arm folded across his chest, the other covering his eyes.

Bledso did not return that night, nor did Harris. Harris had phoned at eight-thirty to say that his wife had come down from New York and would Luther like to join them for dinner, but Luther knew Harris was only being polite and would want to be alone with his wife. And so he had two rooms through which he could pace during the long night. He moved around over the carpeted floor in his bare feet, touching Bledso's hairbrushes, the fine broadcloth pajamas, the smoothness of his tan officer's shirt and spare uniform jacket. He picked up Harris's silk robe off the chair and hung it in the closet. There was something about being close to these men that he enjoyed, their sense of knowing what was right to say and right to do; and now this would end probably tomorrow or the day after. He would go back to Regis and await further orders. Bledso would go with him and see that his charge was properly delivered at home, and would then depart and be gone forever.

He wondered if he could go back to school and then wiped the thought out of his mind. He was twenty-four years old, a man grown, too old to be starting high school. If it were college, he wouldn't mind his age or size so much, but at twenty-four, a national hero— No, the papers would make so much, too much of it.

Oh, Christ, he thought, why couldn't I have died that night? I wanted to. I wanted to. You know I did!

Bledso came in the next morning at nine o'clock, tiptoeing into Luther's room, finding him wide awake, the bedside ashtray filled with cigarette stubs and ashes.

"Hi, Luther," he saluted jauntily.

"Hi, Lieutenant," Luther replied. "You eat yet?"

"Have you eaten, Luther," Bledso corrected.

"No, I ain't—haven't."

Bledso smiled and waved it aside. "I see you've had yourself a busy night again, manufacturing cigarette ashes." He pointed to the ashtray.

Luther smiled guiltily. "Just couldn't get to sleep. Nervous, I guess, now we're that much closer to home."

"Much closer than you think. How about some breakfast now? All I had was a cup of coffee with my charming hostess of last night. And if you could see her roommate, you dope, you'd be hanging yourself right now. Hey, where's Harris?"

"He had company in from New York. His wife came down and they had dinner and spent the night together."

"And you?"

"I was here all the time, Lieutenant."

Bledso cocked an eye and shook his head. "I hope you're different around home, Luther. You sure don't care much for life up here, do you?"

"You could be right, Lieutenant. Maybe I don't understand people from around these parts. Or Boston," he added gratuitously.

"Oh?" Bledso turned around questioningly.

"Nothing. Just skip it. I got to shave and shower now."

Harris joined them for a final cup of coffee as they were finishing breakfast. When they had rolled the table out into the hallway for the waiter to remove, Harris stood up, lit a cigarette, and said, "Well, fellows, as they say it so aptly in the best-made G.I. movies, this is it. Yesterday at the Pentagon they closed out our act officially. I've got another assignment that will keep me here on a desk job. I asked to be relieved on the grounds that if I do any more traveling around, I'll be overage in grade long before my time." He pulled out two manila envelopes from his now-flattened brief case. "In here are your leave papers. Two full months for you, Luther, with thanks from the Pentagon and the War Bond people for your splendid cooperation and all that kind of crap. You'll find it in writing inside, complete with signed and sealed certificates and commendations. Forty-five days for you, Harry. When your leave is up, you'll get your orders direct from the adjutant general's office here in Washington. Okay?"

Both men nodded. Harris turned to Luther.

"Good-by, Luthêr," he said simply and turned to Bledso, then back to Luther. "I guess from now on you'll be on your own, or with Harry at least, until you get back to Regis. These two rooms have been paid for until tomorrow night, so you can stay here all day and tonight, but don't sign any more tabs after tomorrow morning. Your rail transportation and meal vouchers are included with your orders as far as Regis, yours to Chancellor, Harry. You'll have a compartment all the way." He turned back to Luther once more. "You make any plans, Luther?"

"I don't know," Luther replied, fingering the large manila envelope with his name on it. "Some, I guess." There was hesitancy and uneasiness in his voice. "You know about the calls I got before we left Washington last month. I got a call from one of the men last night, wants to see me about some things. Business things. Like a movie out in Hollywood."

Harris flashed a glance to Bledso, who had pursed his lips and shook his head negatively. Harris said to Luther, "If you want to take some good advice, the best I know how to give you, Luther, use those Army transportation and meal tickets and get back to Regis as fast as the train can get you there. I'd get to hell out to that farm of your father's and forget all this hoopla and jazz you've been living through. Get it out of your mind as soon as you can. It's over and it won't last another week around here. Just remember, Luther, since you were decorated, other heroes have made it the same way, and in this league fame doesn't last too long. Even back in Regis it will wear thin after a while, and then maybe every Fourth of July or Decoration Day you can get to sit on a wooden platform in the hot sun with a lot of local dignitaries, the American Legion and V.F.W. boys, to see a parade and be guest of honor and take the salute when the vets pass in review. Then you can eat your fill of Southern-fried chicken with hominy grits and barbecued hog gravy or what the hell ever it is they eat, and go home and wait for the next one.

"I don't mean to pass you over lightly, Luther, but it's tough you didn't get something less than the Big One, something like the Silver or Bronze Star, maybe. With the Medal of Honor, the spotlight is right on you and you're going to have to learn to live up to the Big One because it places the burden of responsibility on you; from now on, you're the Good Example and you've got to behave like one. You're the one mothers will point out to their children and tell them how, if they behave themselves and do what they're told and brush their teeth and study their lessons, they might even grow up to be a hero like you. So along with the heavy responsibilities, you've also got a brand-new set of penalties to go with it."

Harris grimaced. "Luther, please forgive me for talking to you like a father. I know something about your problems even though I'm not wise enough to give you too much help in solving them. There are just a couple of other things I'd like to say before you tell me to go to hell and mind my own goddamned business, which I agree you have the right to do, and if you say it right here and now, I'll shut up and fade out of the picture for good."

Harris waited, but Luther remained silent. Harry Bledso sank down into the upholstered chair and lit a cigarette.

"Okay," Harris continued. "First of all, if you don't keep making noises like a hero once the local celebration is over in Regis, they'll maybe forget all about it and you can get back to leading a normal life. Someone said once that, eventually, all heroes must necessarily

become bores. Go home to the farm and work at it. If you can't do that, let some bigshot, like that Radford man down home, get you a job selling insurance or automobiles or stocks or anything else like those.

"If you're thinking in terms of equating your Medal of Honor with money, forget it. You can't equate money with a medal or with brains or with ability or love or anything else—except money. The calls and messages you've been getting here, the movie boys who've been calling you, keep to hell away from them. They're worse than booby traps and twice as dangerous. They'll drag you out to Hollywood, operate on your nose to straighten it, grind your teeth down and cap 'em, do you over until neither you, your family, nor your closest friends will recognize you. They'll pay you \$10,000, \$20,000, or \$30,000 to make a tenth-rate picture, showing how you knocked off a whole panzer division all by yourself with just a slingshot you made yourself, using spitballs for ammunition and with a half-naked French or German broad running behind you every step of the way.

"Meanwhile, some smart agent, a lawyer, and an accountant-turned-business manager will divide your \$10,000, \$20,000, or \$30,000 between themselves. What's left, if anything, will go for liquor to entertain their friends in your rented house with the swimming pool and a load of fifth-rate, high-priced whores. When it's all over, nothing. But nothing. Not even enough to pay your income taxes with. You'll be a real Hollywood celebrity bum. That's about it, with the accent on the 'bum.'"

Luther had walked over to the window. The rain of last night, bathed in the strong morning sunlight, gave off a heavy, humid air. He stood staring down at the traffic. He heard Harris ask, "Right now, how much money have you got that you can call your own?"

Luther turned slowly, trying to calculate the amount. "I guess, with what piled up while I was in the hospital, about \$800 or \$900, give or take a few either way," he said.

"That's \$800 or \$900 more than you'll have when they've put you through the wringer and stripped the gold fillings out of your teeth." Harris tugged at the straps of his battered brief case, extended his hand again, and said with a warm smile, "Good-by, Luther. Believe me, I've enjoyed knowing you. I mean that honestly. Thanks for helping to make my job easier by being cooperative and saying only what you were told to say. You could have been a real, genuine pain in the ass if you'd wanted to be—in fact, I was actually expecting you to be one—and I'm very grateful to you. I hope that someday when this is all over and if you get back to New York, you'll look

me up, so we can just sit and talk over a few drinks without all the razzle-dazzle blinding us. I took the liberty of putting one of my cards in your envelope there."

Luther shook his hand. "I sure hate to see you go, Captain. I—I—don't know how to say—"

"Then don't say anything. They're sending Bledso along to Regis with you to take care of things locally, public relations-wise, until you're oriented to things down there. What that means in English is that when he's sure you won't louse things up by doing or saying the wrong things, he'll get out of your hair and you'll be your own man again. You take it easy, Luther, and remember the most famous of all Army sayings: *Don't let the bastards wear you down!*"

Luther smiled and said, "Thanks, Captain, for all you done for me. I know I ain't—hell, 'ain't' sounds like it fits there—I know I ain't smart and I know those reporters would of made a horse's ass out of me if you and Harry weren't there, so I'm beholden to you. But don't you worry about me one single bit, Captain. I'll do all right."

Bledso looked up and Harris peered closer at Luther, hearing this all-new, confident note in his voice, something neither had noticed in all the time they had been together. "I hope so, Luther," Harris said. "I really do."

"I will, Captain." Still the veneer of sureness, hardness in his tone. "All the time everybody else has been doing my talking for me, I been doing some thinking for myself. I know there's something big in this thing, this medal they given me, and I know some people are going to try to take advantage of it, make it work for them, but I'm going to fool all of them. I'm going to keep on doing what I been doing."

"And what's that?" Harris asked with genuine curiosity.

"I don't rightly know at the moment, Captain. All I know is I done a pretty good job so far keeping my mouth shut, letting everybody else do most of the talking. I'll see how it works out when I get home."

Harris laughed, went to the door and opened it. "That's the best piece of common sense I've heard come out of any of the three of us these past five weeks. You know, Luther, I think you're just liable to make it at that. Anyway, I sure hope to hell you do. I hope one of you heroes comes out on top. They say the odds are pretty much against it, but you've got my best wishes and I hope you're one of the few who makes it."

Chapter 4

1. *January, 1919*

At the age of twenty-nine, Marcus Audrey Radford was undoubtedly the most envied bachelor in Regis County, if not in the entire state. From his father, Justin, he had inherited the well-oiled political organization that had taken many years of cautious and painstaking effort to put together and rule with an iron, however benevolent, hand; that is to say, benevolent in the sight of the people, ironlike in his demands of the men he had backed for office from city clerk to governor.

On his way up, Justin, a tall, handsomely rugged man, with the choice of the state's most charming, lovely, and willing belles, had paused only long enough to woo and win Lucyann Turner, the shy, plain daughter of John Fox Turner, Regis's influential banker. The two men became one of the most formidable teams that part of the South had ever known.

Thus, in addition to the political fortune that became his upon Justin Radford's death, Marcus also inherited the money and land that had once belonged to John Fox Turner, having benefited greatly by the traits, wisdom, and training both men had imparted to him during the years of their close association. And now, feeling no further need to cement his already well-constructed fortress of wealth and power, Marcus took time away from his banking, estate, and political occupations to marry Martha-Louise Vincent, the strikingly beautiful daughter of Hadley and Jessica Vincent, who had returned from private schooling in Atlanta during the previous June.

Hadley Vincent was a local attorney who had inherited a lucrative practice from his father and father-in-law, who had been partners. When Jessica's father died a year after Hadley's father, Hadley had taken over the firm on his own. It took several years before the luster of the firm of Emory and Vincent began to fade, then tarnish, under Hadley's inept direction and careless handling. By the time the Vincents were feeling the financial pinch, Marcus Radford's

interest in Martha-Louise had become apparent. Jessica, nonetheless, opposed the marriage that Hadley had been urging upon his daughter.

"Who are the Radfords?" Jessica stormed. "Justin was a ruffian with no background who came to Regis and took advantage of a situation. My father and mother refused to receive him socially. Marcus Radford is no better than his father was."

"The Turners—" Hadley protested.

"I went to school with Lucyann Turner, Hadley. I knew the family very well. Her mother was that—"

"I've heard that story so many times. Why can't you women let the dead remain dead without raking over their graves? Lucyann Turner is dead. So is her father, John Fox Turner. So is Marcus's father, Justin. That leaves Marcus. He is one of the wealthiest men in this part of the state, if not the wealthiest. We are, at our rate of spending, about to become one of the poorest. Marcus Radford's bank already holds \$12,000 of my mortgages that I find more and more difficult to reduce. Martha-Louise can marry him and live a life of luxury and ease, free from debt. Would you keep her from it?"

"And you from a release of your indebtedness to him? Perhaps to trade your daughter for some additional financial assistance or legal business from him?" Jessica asked pointedly.

"She could do worse," Hadley said drily. "Marcus is no monster. He is a fine-looking man, a leader in our community with the respect of—"

"He is a—*peasant!*" Jessica snapped unpleasantly.

In the end it was Martha-Louise who made her own decision, having listened to her mother's passionate plea against mixing pure Emory and Vincent blood with that of the Turner-Radford stock, then to her father's more practical reasoning. She remembered full well that she had left Miss Charlotte Colton's Finishing School for Select Young Ladies in Atlanta because the money necessary to keep up an extensive wardrobe had not been forthcoming. She had seen the effect of genteel poverty on others and did not relish the thought of experiencing it for her herself.

She accepted Marcus Radford's proposal the night of the Borden's Thanksgiving dinner and dance, and on New Year's Day of 1920 they were married at Radford Hall.

In the spring of that year Peter Farrington came calling for an increased campaign donation. The railroad and utility people were putting up a heavy fund for an unknown lawyer, James Flears,

to oppose the party choice, Henry Frisbie Chance, but such was the financial power and effort behind Flears that Chance, as the Chancellor *Examiner* put it very aptly, had very little of it. Nine days before Primary Election Day the killing blow fell upon Peter Farrington, Marcus Radford, and the other leaders of the party. Newspapers throughout the state had received a telegram from Chance that read, simply:

ON ADVICE OF MY PHYSICIAN, I REGRET THAT I MUST WITHDRAW MY NAME FROM THE NOMINATION FOR GOVERNORSHIP. I WISH TO THANK MY FOLLOWERS, SUPPORTERS, AND WORKERS ON MY BEHALF AND URGE THEM TO SUPPORT MR. JAMES FLEARS, WHO, I AM CERTAIN, WILL MAKE AN OUTSTANDING GOVERNOR.

HENRY FRISBIE CHANCE

Peter Farrington got the news in Thomaston and hurried back to his Chancellor headquarters. He picked up several newspapers at the cigar counter of the Randolph, went to his suite and locked the door, then asked the operator not to ring his telephone. Later, a telegram was pushed under his door. It was from Henry Chance, a more personal message, explaining in greater detail the sudden breakdown in his health, the extreme caution urged by his physician, his need to withdraw. When he finally permitted his henchmen to enter the suite, Farrington passed the telegram around to Sam Hildebrand, to Nocky Rogers, to Damon Trent and last, to Mike Phillips.

Into this wake Marcus walked. Peter Farrington greeted him with a snort, smashing a big, bony-knuckled fist down on his leather desk pad so that the papers, telegrams, a ruler and pair of scissors leaped off the surface and landed with a clatter.

"Goddamn his purple, thieving soul!" he stormed with impotent rage. "He was reached by that gang of thieves backing Flears. The low son-of-a-bitch made a deal and cut our throats with a dull, rusted fish knife. I'd like to have my hands around Chance's throat right now, the filthy scum!"

"The double-crossing mother—" Nocky Rogers began, but Farrington's bitter laugh cut across his words. His white-knuckled fist struck the desk again to emphasize the words that rasped harshly from his throat. "Goddamn it, I don't mind getting licked fair and square in a fight or at the polls, but *this!* getting it like *this!* Oh, the dirty, louse-ridden—!"

Marcus laughed at the solemn, mournful group. "Hell," he

snorted, "we ourselves have done worse than that in our time, Peter. Like the time we strangled and crucified Ham Grayson with a lot of trumped-up lies, pouring 'em out so fast he didn't have time to answer them. And a few more since him. Man, if we went back over some of the monkeyshines we've pulled together, no rope would be long enough to hang all of us who deserved it."

Farrington wailed, "How in the name of Christ could I have been so damned sure of things that I let myself underestimate the railroad people?" he asked, knowing there would be no answer.

Damon Trent said, "Well, the question of the moment is, where do we go from here?"

"Where," Farrington said dully, "is a good question. It's too damned late to dig up the money or a new candidate with Primary Day close enough to strangle us. Oh, they timed it perfectly, they did."

"Well," Nocky said in a somewhat jocular mood, "anybody got any ideas about what we can be doing for the next four years?"

Marcus smiled and said, "You boys don't wear defeat very well, do you? Maybe it's because it's been so long since you've tasted one that you're not used to it." He took a cigar from the humidor on Farrington's desk. Farrington got up and began to pace the floor and Marcus sat down, swiveled around so that he could see each of the men present.

"I believe the last question was, 'What can we do?' Let me tell you. From now on, we've got to make sure that the party has a war chest that no other group can top, be it railroad, utilities interests, anybody. We got ourselves beaten by a lack of money, not overconfidence, so from now on we've got to come up with enough money to insure every county and district in the state. In the meantime what must be done, I'm going to do right now. I'm going over to see Mr. James Flears and eat some crow. He's licked us good and deserves to see us eating the leftovers. I'm going to see what kind of a deal I can make with him and his gang."

"You selling out to Flears?" Mike Phillips asked in disbelief.

Marcus studied Mike's earnest, intent face. His own showed nothing more than understanding and kindness as he said slowly, "Mike, in this peculiar game of politics, to which I have given so much of my time and money, we have to face the fact that when a new leader is born, you can do one of two things: fight him for the rest of your life and be satisfied with his leavings every so often; or go out and join him open-handedly, bury the hatchet, then sit down and eat with him at the same trough without having to worry

about getting indigestion. In four friendly years you can find sixteen different ways to beat his brains out the next time around. So, in answer to your question, I am *not* selling out. No. What I am doing, instead, is buying us all in."

The deal was made between Marcus Radford and James Flears, and it was Flears's own gracious suggestion that Peter Farrington remain titular head of the party, since it would insure support and eliminate the need for him to build an entirely new administrative staff. Marcus's men would support Flears in the legislature and Marcus would remain the effective head of the party. But behind locked doors Marcus and Farrington outlined a new set of informal policies for their workers to follow for the years ahead.

In the future every office would have a price tag upon it.

Every favor must, in cash or deed, be paid for.

Every contractor, supplier, or vender of services, whether he received his contract through the party or by straight bidding, must contribute to the party war chest in order to insure that his next bid would be among those to be considered with the others.

Loyalty must come above all else, and in this no man would ever be given a second chance.

Finally, but foremost to be remembered by all: "*We will reward our friends and destroy our enemies.*"

2.

In the year that followed their marriage, a daughter was born to Martha-Louise and Marcus Radford, and Jessica Vincent proposed the name Bethann after her maternal grandmother. Marcus, hoping to someday achieve a peace with his vinegar-dispositioned mother-in-law, or at least a truce, agreed. Now Marcus set the wheels in motion to rid himself of the clutch of Hadley Vincent upon his neck. He was tired of Hadley's whinings and complaints that Dan Cornell was carrying most of Marcus's legal business. And so, within a few months, Hadley was appointed to fill out the unexpired term of a retiring superior court judge in Regis County, thereby making Martha-Louise extremely happy and Jessica somewhat less critical of him.

By now Marcus had achieved a maturity and importance that far transcended any personal ambitions others suspected he might have for higher political office. He was most content to live the good life he had carved out for himself in Regis, where his political domination and influence were far greater than they could ever be

if he accepted a political appointment or ran for elective office. His vitality fanned out from Regis in every direction, just as electrical impulses surged through wires to a desired destination. Congressmen and the state's two United States Senators seldom failed to keep in touch with him, and managed to call upon him in person on trips back to their homes during recesses.

Evidence of his growing importance was manifested in an incident that took place shortly after the new, imposing County Building was dedicated in April of 1922. The bronze plaque of dedication had been unveiled during the official ceremony, exposing the legend:

COUNTY BUILDING

County of Regis

April 8, 1922

In smaller letters beneath this were listed the names of the five county supervisors, the architect, then Governor James Flears. The ceremony had taken place on Saturday afternoon, and late that night, on the face of the white granite beneath the bronze tablet, someone had added a crude, hastily painted legend that blazoned its bright red message for all to see:

MARCUS A. RADFORD

Sole Prop.

Efforts to scrub this amateurish brushwork from the granite seemed almost fruitless. Even after many years, when the sun shone upon it at a certain angle, the words were still visible. The incident had not angered or disturbed Marcus in the slightest. Privately, he enjoyed this mark of appreciation for his true position in the county.

3.

Curiously, it was Marcus's lawyer, Dan Cornell, who came up with the most logical (and fairly simple) approach to the financial needs of the party. When the lawyer first presented the idea to him, Marcus had protested, disliking the means to which they would have to stoop to collect party funds; but Dan had reasoned it out well for him and Marcus began to see the practical merits of the plan.

"Marc," Dan pleaded, "this is a ready-made setup right here in your own backyard. When twenty bushels of corn and a few hundred pounds of sugar and some yeast can be turned into \$1200 to

\$1500, we've got the easiest way in the world, right at our fingertips in Regis, to buy us our political offices, officials—hell, even judges. No one need know you are a part of anything illegal. Someone is profiting heavily by it now. Money that could be put to good, much-needed use is slipping away, being taken, spent and hoarded by others. If you are interested, say so and I'll look into it further."

In the week the problem had been lying uneasily in Marcus's mind, Cornell had been busy. By the time Marcus asked him to his home for another conference, Dan was ready.

"Lud Hickman is your boy, Marcus."

"Lud? Sheriff Hickman?"

Cornell nodded and grinned. "He's your baby. Makes it all the easier, doesn't it?"

"Well—" Marcus grinned with satisfaction—"where do we go from here, Dan?"

"Not far. Why don't you get him into your office tomorrow and I'll just happen to drop by 'accidentally' at the same time. I think I can bring the whole thing to a head without too much trouble."

The next afternoon Sheriff Lud Hickman came into the bank and told Miss Marshall he had a two o'clock appointment with Mr. Marcus. When she had shown him inside and closed the door after him, she returned to her desk and phoned Dan Cornell's office. Within ten minutes Dan was there, apologizing for the intrusion, asking Marcus to sign some papers that, as Marcus saw, but Hickman could not, were meaningless. As he began to sign what appeared to be a number of official documents, Lud Hickman rose, hefted his pistol belt up to a more comfortable level, said, "If you're busy right now, Mr. Marcus, I c'd come back later. I got some things boilin' in the pot needs lookin' after."

"This will take only a moment or two more, Lud," Marcus said. He handed the papers back to Dan, who shuffled them into a neat pile and returned them to his brief case, then looked at Marcus. Marcus nodded. Dan sat down in the chair beside the desk, put the brief case at his feet, and leaned forward toward the sheriff.

"Lud," Dan began, "you're fairly well off, aren't you?"

Hickman looked startled for a moment, then braced himself quickly and asked, "On \$2400 a year?" There was a faint note of the incredulous in his voice.

Cornell smiled suavely. "No, Lud," he replied, "not on \$2400 a year. On what you take in on the side."

Lud drew himself up. "Now you just wait one minute—" he be-

gan, but now Marcus interrupted, holding up a hand to silence both men. "Lud," he said, "let's not make this an embarrassing thing for you or us. I might help you out some by telling you that for a little while now we've been aware of what has been going on in your department. We know that you've been making the rounds collecting—or shaking down, might be a better term—protection money from every gambling house, moonshining outlet, and whorehouse in the whole county. We know that bootleggers can run their whiskey through Regis County without the slightest danger of getting their trucks or loads confiscated, or they themselves thrown into jail. And we know also that no one could be so amazingly lucky as to escape your eagle eyes in that manner for very long. Don't try to hide it, Lud. If we have to call people in to prove it against you, we'll have to prefer charges officially and you'll be through as sheriff. All that can happen to you then is that you'll be a tenant in your own jail."

Hickman squirmed uneasily in his chair.

"When we pinned that badge on you, Lud, I don't remember any kind of license going with it that put you in business for yourself. We know you've been enjoying your little sideline, but we also know that you've been playing in a big-league game for little-league money. Pennies. Pennies, when you could have been playing for gold pieces."

The cigar in Hickman's left hand had died. At first his reaction was one of angry denial, but as Cornell and Marcus outlined how much they knew about his extracurricular activities, he knew it was useless to hold back. By refusing, he could be impeached and thrown out of office in disgrace, even jailed. If he capitulated, he would remain sheriff and become an important cog in the "inner circle." So far they hadn't mentioned that he was feeding his prisoners on less than the prescribed amount for each man per day, or that he had been using prison labor for private purposes, or some of the other little sidelines he had been operating. By cooperating, he might very well get them to overlook these additional sources of private revenue.

Cornell took over from Radford now. "Lud, we've known every move you've been making along these lines. Just remember that, with your badge, a certain amount of jealousy must exist within your office. Jealous people talk, and when they do, their talk manages to reach the right ears. In this case, ours."

Let him talk, Hickman thought. I'll find out how much he knows, how much cleaning up I've got to do in my own office.

"We know when you knocked over Greer Hamish's gambling rooms and made a deal there, because one hour in your jail was all it took before Hamish agreed to cut you in and walked out a free man, no record of arrest, no bail, and resumed operations. We know when you did the same at the Frenchman's, the night you collared Miss Cora Lavelle and raided Dulcy Langer's fancy house. Also, we know approximately how much you've been collecting from Mordecai Buckey's moonshining outlets."

"I never taken a nickel from old Mordecai," Hickman protested.

"We know that too, Lud. Only from the retail outlets."

Lud smiled ruefully and somewhat painfully. "All right," he said in surrender. "What next?"

Marcus took over again. "Now that we understand each other, Lud, let's get on with it. What you've taken so far, that's yours. With this prohibition thing growing and getting more serious all the time, what you're going to collect from now on will make what you've taken in the past look like chicken feed. Those people have got to understand once and for all that they're not just paying off somebody for a little protection; they've got to know that from now on they've got to have *partners* in order to operate their businesses.

"From here on in you'll still act as the collection agency. For that you'll be well paid. Everything will be handled on a weekly basis, collectible every Monday morning. And, Lud, it will have to be an accurate count because we have our own way of finding out just how much you will be collecting. Not that we don't trust you, Lud. It's just a businessman's way of doing business, keeping figures."

Cornell asked Hickman, "How about that still over in Buckeytown?"

Lud grinned. "I ain't never touched it, seeing as how I was collecting on the retail end. I figured if I stepped in and he refused to play along and shut down, I'd be chopping the head off the goose that was laying the golden eggs. But now that the picture is changed like this, I reckon I could lean some of my weight and muscle on him if I was of a mind to."

"Good. Put yourself in a mind to do just that."

"We know it's there, Lud," Marcus said, "and we've got a thought that it could make a really big operation if it were properly organized."

"Sure it could. Except that it's only a little ol' still that don't put out much more than a few hundred gallons a week. Now you take and put up a wallop over there in the Swamp and I'll guarantee

that with 'protection' from this side, we could produce ten or more times as much, get a fleet of trucks to haul it out, and no federal or state revenue men'd ever get close to it. On'iest thing is, to get old Mordecai to—uh—cooperate."

"All right, Lud, we'll leave that part of it to you. One more thing. No one is to know where the money goes after you collect it. You can let them think it goes up to Chancellor, into the governor's own pocket if they want to believe that, but you keep quiet and never mention either of us in connection with it. The minute the word is out that either Dan or I are personally connected with it, Lud," Marcus said tersely, "that will be your last day as sheriff of Regis County. Maybe on this earth. You understand that now, don't you, Lud? No one is to know, not even your wife or closest friend."

"I understand, Marcus," said Hickman, using the banker's given name for the first time, accepting the fact that their partnership gave him a new and more important stature.

"And," Marcus added coolly and pointedly, "this new association does not include any personal privileges you did not enjoy prior to today. Do you understand that clearly, Hickman?"

Lud looked up sharply, understanding well enough that Marcus would never let him get any closer than he had been before. "I understand, Mr. Radford," he replied meekly and turned toward the door.

When he reached it, Marcus said, "You make up a list of each stop on your rounds and the amount you've been collecting. Give it to Dan. And have it in his office by five o'clock this afternoon, Lud."

Hickman turned and looked balefully at Marcus, then at Cornell. "I'll be there," he said and went out.

Marcus Radford was in Dan Cornell's office at five that afternoon when Lud Hickman came in with his list. When it had been examined carefully and a new "protection rate" had been established, Marcus handed it back to Lud, who glanced at it and said, "Okay. I'll pass the word along. I don't think we'll have too much trouble with this." Suddenly he laughed.

"What is it, Lud?" Marcus asked.

"Well, Mr. Marcus, it takes a kind of load off my mind, knowing we're in this thing together. Back a while ago, I wanted to come to you with the whole proposition, but I was kind of scared, thinking you might not be willing to come in."

Now Marcus laughed lightly. "Lud, it takes more money than all of us have put together to support the candidates of our choice against the kind of money the big opposition can raise. Money and politics go together like the air and water we need to sustain us on this earth. We've got to have it or, politically speaking, we're dead. These people operating gambling and fancy houses, the liquor makers and runners, they've got to have protection or they're dead; so we've got to help each other to what we want and need in order to keep alive.

"Contribution to the party is what it's called by those who get it. Shakedown, graft, or blackmail is what it's called by those who pay it. But call it by any name you will, they've got to pay because nobody can operate a still or a wholesale or retail liquor outlet in a dry state, a gambling hell or a whorehouse, not even for twenty-four hours, without the police finding out about it.

"The price for protection comes high, but not as high here as they would have to pay in Chancellor or down in New Orleans, Birmingham, Baton Rouge, or up in Washington or New York. They've got to pay for it because they can't live without it; but they can afford it only as long as they aren't squeezed so dry that it becomes unprofitable for them to operate.

"It's the same way in business. You pay certain taxes and you buy certain licenses to operate. If the taxes or cost of licenses ever got to be too high to show the businessman a profit, he'd be bankrupted; and the city, county, or state couldn't afford to let that happen to a man. With politics there's a difference, because politics and vice go hand in hand down the same streets, into the same fine clubs and homes, up the same darkened alleys, into churches and business establishments, the slum houses and shacks and the fine, big mansions. Also, they go the same way to the polls to vote the way we ask them to vote. Hand in hand they come into being, hand in hand they live and work together, the rich and the poor, politics and vice. That's the way it is and has always been and no laws were ever made that were strong enough to change it no matter how much the people holler for reform tickets. We professionals? We use it the best way we know how to do the most good with it."

5.

Regis was known as a "good" town for Negroes. This was principally because an accident of geography had helped create an almost natural physical separation between the white and colored populations. County Road slashed and wound through the town-

ship, paralleling the Welcome River that lay a little over a mile to the west of it. Between the road and river bank, some eighty-five percent of Regis's Negroes were settled in almost every type of shack and cottage, mostly of primitive construction.

In this densely wooded area of a mile in width and perhaps three miles in length, land had been partially cleared and men joined in groups to build their homes in huddled clusters without regard for living space, breathing room, or need for expansion or sanitation. Chickens and pigs were kept in small, inadequately fenced yards adjacent to living quarters, and these, together with anonymous packs of dogs and stray cats, soon became members of the households. As the years passed, the forest beside the Welcome had been turned into a teeming slum of crackerboxes that lined dark, unpaved, and unlighted streets of raw dirt that turned to mud with each rainfall, then hardened into deep gullies to make vehicular passage practically impossible after the sun had dried out the muck.

The white world of Regis lived east of County Road, with little regard for what happened in the Negro section as long as there was no "ruckusing" great enough to spill over into the white area. The Negroes who worked in Regis, with the exception of some fifteen percent who were "live-in" help, returned to their own community each night. While they were on the "white side" of the road, they were generally well behaved, polite, accepting their role in the white man's life and world without complaint. Once they crossed County Road and neared their homes, they became more natural and at ease, boisterous, louder with laughter and good-natured pushing and jostling, much like a group of children released from school at the end of a day. They kept their fun, fights, and most of their problems among themselves; and it was said—and not without some envy—among the whites, "You want to see life, you go over across County Road, specially on a Saturday night. Them niggers! Man alive, they sure are something!"

6.

On the west bank of the Welcome River, directly across from the Negro community, lay the Swamp.

Locally, it had no other name. On earliest maps recorded and filed, it had been called the Bienville Swamp, probably after one of the followers of d'Ibberville. Later it became known (and so shown in some of the older records) as Frenchman's Swamp. Some said it measured a good twenty or thirty square miles, but this was

doubted and scoffed at. Still others claimed it was even greater in size, more vast. Actually, its intricate and puzzling maze of natural waterways and canals twisted and turned and coiled so circuitously that it was likely to cause any man trying to traverse their length and breadth to believe the area to be many miles longer and wider than it was in reality.

Among the older white men who now sat dreaming in the Square, many could recall the name of a man here and there who had disappeared into the Swamp and never returned. Young and adventurous men, seemingly without fear, would pole their pirogues and shallow-draft boats up its coffee-colored fingers off the main waterway, then circle and twist within a confusing tangle of reed-lined banks and water crossings whose high and wild growth might easily hide another such arm or finger only a few yards away. Sometimes, years later, old and rotted boards would float out into a narrow ribbon of water, or an oar would come drifting down into the Welcome River, perhaps some other floatable object, causing all to wonder what had befallen whom, and how long ago.

The Swamp had also taken its toll of men on the run from the law, men who sought to hide beneath its cloak of safety, penetrating deeply into its wilderness to escape the baying bloodhounds they knew would be sent after them, hoping to evade man and beast until it would be safe to come out and go elsewhere; but few of these hardy spirits were ever seen alive again. Later on, intrepid hunters had come upon whitened bones, rotted clothing, a rusted firearm, fishing equipment. Some of the items had been sorrowfully identified, but mostly they remained anonymous.

Birds of many hues and kinds screeched, halloo-ed, and racketed across treacherous bogs, its dry stretches, up and down its waterways, and through jungles of trees and bushes, creeping vines and roots that covered hidden, overgrown sinkholes. Egrets, wood storks, white ibis, and other hungry, voracious specimens had been seen feeding in the slough, pausing only to look to their own safety, resting suspiciously on the whitened limbs of a vine-strangled tree. Spanish moss hung thickly, like heavy curtains, and when the wind blew, trailed like gray, foggy banners or streamers in a storm; and with all, there was an immense tangle of alluring beauty, violently colorful flora that was breathtaking to behold, of death and life walking and sleeping beside each other.

There were redwing blackbirds, blue heron, fish crows, whippoorwills, woodpeckers and water turkeys, and a hundred other species

of birds, each with its distinct screams, splashings, squallings, all adding to the frightening cacaphonic symphony.

Always there were the impenetrable interlacings of grotesque roots, rising above the water level in tangled groves, and snarled vines, resembling hands that reached gnarled fingers up to clutch and snatch at the human invader, the bird, the animal that came close. And through these jungles and obstacles a few Negroes poled the narrow flat barges in and out, learning to navigate the Swamp, to act as guides for white hunters who would come later, then give up the hope of finding the larger wild game reputed to be there.

And above all else was the screeching chorus of millions of frogs that could on any otherwise still night be heard everywhere throughout Regis; would also serve as supper on hundreds of tables during the week.

7.

It was here that Mordecai Buckey had settled some years earlier. An itinerant peddler of pots, skillets, and other utensils, cheap bolt goods, and a potent product of his own manufacture called PROFESSIONAL TONIC that was no more than a lightly flavored 100-proof alcohol, he had tired of wandering from one Negro community to the next. He found the Negroes of Regis hospitable, and soon learned that most of the corn whiskey consumed there was imported from distant counties or neighboring states.

The tall, powerfully built Mordecai needed little more than the sloe-eyed Alura Pratt to convince him that it was time to settle down. After his marriage it took but a short while for the enterprising peddler to become the Negro community's most affluent citizen: leader, judge, arbitrator, preacher—and producer of the finest corn whiskey ever introduced to the area, the result of earlier training in his native Tennessee. When necessary, he ruled with a firm hand; otherwise, he was quick to show the generous and paternal side of himself.

Time passed happily and pleasantly for Mordecai, and when Alura gave him a daughter, although there were by this time several other children that had been fathered elsewhere by him, this was cause for a celebration of monumental proportions, one that lasted for nearly a week of feasting and drinking and dancing. The child was named Sophronia, and as time rolled peacefully by, she, like her parents, grew tall and sturdy. She ran through the community (long since named Buckeytown after its leader) like a princess and

was accepted everywhere for what she was: Mordecai Buckey's daughter.

By the time she was sixteen, she was pregnant, and the man in the case, George Tilebin, was happy to marry Sophronia and take his place in the community (and the already crowded Buckey household) as son-in-law and heir apparent to the Buckey throne. Within five months a son was born to the happy couple, and it was decided that since he had been born on the first day of spring, his name would be Robin. Robin Mordecai Tilebin.

Joy, in this case, was not to be lasting, for shortly after Robin's first birthday George Tilebin, working at his job as laborer and hod carrier for the Apperson Building Company, turned up on the job drunk one Monday morning, and when Tooney Clark, the white foreman, told him to get off the job for good, George became incensed at being summarily dismissed after eight years of faithful service to Colonel Foster Apperson. He raised his hand and struck at Tooney. Whether Tooney fell or slipped was never revealed, but he did strike his head against a small pile of brick and was carried off to the County General Hospital where he lay unconscious with a skull concussion. The other Negroes who had witnessed this horrifying and unspeakable act all claimed they had been otherwise engaged and had not seen Tooney when he "slip an' fell accidental onto that there pile a brick."

George had run all the way home, sober now and fearful with terror. He told Mordecai the truth about what had happened, and after a few moments of careful thought Mordecai had gone outside into the woods nearby and returned with a sheaf of bills and some silver. This he gave to Sophronia to guard, then told George he must pack and get himself and his family out of Regis while Tooney Clark was still alive.

"Wheah at c'n I go they won't fin' me?" George, dazed by his sudden misfortune, cried in despair.

"You git out an' you git out fast. You go to Detroit, New York, or Chicago or some other big city up north where you can get yourself lost. You make a home f' youah wife an' boy, git you a job an' taken care of 'em. If'n you don't, boy, an' ah got to come a-lookin' foah you, you goin' a be a heap worse off'n if'n you stayed right heah an' got yourse'f lynched. You git out a heah on the eight-fo'ty northbound an' bless yo' lucky stars that white man can't talk yet. Once he open up his mouf an' you still heah, you a dead man. Now you git Sophrony an' Robbie packed an' git a-movin'."

Robbie Tilebin, until he returned to the "home" he had never known, but had "seen" through Sophronia's and George's eyes, had never known a moment in his life that wasn't crowded. He lived with his father and mother in one small, cold-water tenement after another. His playgrounds had been the dirty, crowded streets and filthy, garbage-strewn alleys in the ghettos of New York, then Detroit, then Chicago, where George worked in the stockyards. Sophronia carefully managed their money, and in time their savings had mounted to a respectable total; but no amount of money could secure for them any better living quarters or conditions than these noisy, crowded, overtenanted, urine-smelling, roach- and rat-infested flats that were forever beyond cleanliness, regardless of the amount of effort put into the thankless task.

Robbie had been sent to public school, and it was his greatest enjoyment to witness the gratification of his parents when he was finally able to write, to read to them what he had written. Now he could read the newspapers to Sophronia and George as they rocked back and forth in their chairs at night and listened to their son with overflowing pride. The earlier futility of attempted communication with Mordecai was ended. Robbie's first major effort was a carefully composed letter to Regis that said simply:

We in Chicago. We are well. I am working. We miss you-all.
G. T.

The return address was included in a postscript, but no reply came; and they pondered over whether it was because the letter was never delivered or that Tooney Clark had died and Mordecai was afraid his reply would mark George's location for the law.

Robbie grew up with many heroic and valiant stories (mostly exaggerations) of his grandfather's greatness as a respected community leader. He came to see, through George's and Sophronia's eyes, the lush woods and fields, the bounty of the earth and the Welcome River, the kindness of their gentle people, the breathing room for all, the dogs and other pets, the sweet-smelling clean country air, the absence of snow and ice and sleet and the need to keep heavily bundled up against the freezing cold of winter.

Soon he too came to think of Regis, Buckeytown in particular, as his "home," and when he compared his limited world of Chicago with it, he began to hate the city and the poor white trash, the

hunkies and dagoes and others whose equally poor and filthy tenements, no better than their own, ringed them; even as they were scorned by the hoodlums who raced through the streets and stoned them, broke their windows, ganged up together to war on them, called to them derisively, cursed and mocked them.

It galled him to see the people his parents and their friends referred to as "poor white trash" seek and maintain the only superiority possible to them by attacking the Negroes. He came to hate his father's softness toward the white loungers and loafers at the corners who taunted them with obscenities and dirty, vulgar suggestions as they passed, feeling the tightening grip of his father's hand on one side, that of his mother on the other. And when he cried out in angry protest, they "shush-ed" him and told him to be quiet; and where did he think he was? In Regis?

9.

On a Sunday morning shortly after Lud Hickman's talk with Marcus Radford and Dan Cornell, the sheriff came into Buckeytown and drove directly to the home of Mordecai Buckey. It was seven o'clock and hardly a soul was abroad at that early hour. Not until nine would they begin rising to attend services at the church, conducted by Mordecai. A group of some four or five children, ranging in ages from two to six, played together on the steps of the house, and he could hear the voices of others coming from the side and backyards. They stared open-mouthed and wide-eyed at the sheriff's car, stood in quiet awe as the white man walked up the path and onto the porch of the house. He walked through the open door without knocking. Inside there were more children, nine of them, Lud counted, of various ages, infants playing on the floor, whimpering, laughing, jabbering meaninglessly, older boys and girls, neatly dressed, hair combed, being readied for church. Three women moved about the large, circular table, placing cups and plates around. From the back room, the kitchen, came the frying and boiling sounds of the morning meal being prepared.

The three women stopped talking among themselves and their smiles disappeared. One said shyly, "Kin ah do somethin' foah you, Mist' Sheriff?"

Lud reached up and pushed his hat back on his head. "You old Mordecai's wife?" he asked.

Two of the women answered simultaneously, "Yassir."

Lud laughed obscenely. "Both a you?"

One of the women turned and went sullenly into the kitchen. Of the two remaining, one said, "Ah'm his wife."

"Well, now, that's just fine," said Lud. "Now we got that point settled, where's your husband?"

"He's in his room, sleepin'," she replied flatly.

The smile left Lud's face. "Ain't anybody ever told you when you talk to a white man you say 'sir'?"

Sullenly, "Ah say it befoah, ah did."

"Well, you say it *every* time, you hear me, gal?"

"Yassir."

"Which room is he in?"

Alarm spread on the woman's face. "Ah go call him fo' you. Sir."

Lud had caught the direction in which her eyes had moved. He strode toward the door, saying, "Never mind. I'll call him myself."

He pushed the door open and there lay Mordecai Buckey in the huge iron bed. A woman of perhaps twenty-eight or thirty lay beside him, one dark leg drawn up over his partly exposed, naked thigh. Both were asleep, and it was obvious that beneath the thin sheet neither was wearing sleeping clothes.

Lud stood for a moment looking down upon them, then put his boot sole up against the foot of the bed and pushed hard. The bed rocked back and forth. The woman woke, screamed at the sight of the white man, then pulled the cover higher over herself to hide her magnificently ample bosom from his gaze. The scream woke Mordecai and he raised up sleepily in the bed. The woman turned, grabbed for a loose cotton shift that she slipped over her head, letting it fall around her as she got out of the bed, took up a skimpy cotton robe from the chair and pulled it around herself, apprehension toward the sheriff showing in her frightened eyes.

Mordecai stared sleepily, rubbed his eyes, and finally recognized his caller. "You lookin' foah me foah somethin', Mist' Sher'ff?" he asked thickly.

"You get up out a there, Mordecai. I got things to talk to you about."

"You 'restin' me foah somethin', Mist' Sher'ff?"

"Not yet, Mordecai, not yet. When I do, it'll be for more than one thing. Like moonshinin', for one. Like fornicatin' the way you doin' right here with one woman, whilst another one in the next room says she's your wife and still another one out there who thinks she is."

Mordecai began to laugh good-naturedly, shaking the bed with the movement and low roar of it. "Shuh, Mist' Sher'ff, I don't even

know what you talkin' about, suh. I on'y got me one wife. Sho, I got a mess a female relatives, like this 'un. Got to have some place to bed 'em down, shuh. But only one wife I know about. About that moonshinin' thing—"

Lud smiled with apparent amusement. "I can't talk to you about it in here, Mordecai. What I got to say to you is private and I don't think such a thing as privacy c'n be had here." He glanced again at the huge man, then at the sullen young woman standing in the corner with the robe clutched tightly around her generous proportions that no robe could completely hide. The look of apprehension left her face and now there was only mild defiance. Lud Hickman shook his head. "Too many women and kids around here, Mordecai."

"They ain' all mine, Mist' Sher'ff. Most of 'em, they been brung or lef' here by people. Yes, sir."

"Mordecai, you get up and put some clothes on and eat your breakfast. When you get finished, you come over to my office. I'll be there waitin' for you. Don't be no more'n an hour, else I'll send a deputy over to pick you up." His eyes ranged over the woman again. "I hafta do that, I might just tell him to pick up four or five witnesses."

The good humor faded from Mordecai's face with the mention of having to pick up witnesses. "I be there, Mist' Sher'ff," he said with a positiveness that left no doubt about it in Hickman's mind.

In the sheriff's dark, musty, and cluttered office Mordecai, dressed in his "preachin' an' buryin' best," sat uncomfortably in the largest chair in the almost airless room, feeling little security as he heard the groans of protest from the wooden chair that supported his huge body. Lud had been talking calmly and steadily for more than half an hour. He was being open and direct, pointing out to Mordecai the wisdom of a cooperative alliance between them. He made it plain that an expanded operation, complete with full police protection, would be more profitable to both; in fact, it would, properly planned and executed, make far less work for Mordecai and bring him greater profit.

Buckey squirmed mentally as well as physically, listening to Lud Hickman's slow, penetrating drawl. He trusted white men no farther than beyond his failing eyesight and hated the thought of working for or with them, knowing how easy it was for them to move in and take over. No, not where money or women were concerned did he trust any white man; and in his mind Sheriff Lud Hickman was certainly no better than the others; in fact, there were

many whom he would prefer to deal with in place of the sheriff.

Which way to turn, he thought as Hickman's voice droned on, resting only to shift his wad of tobacco or to shoot a stream of brown saliva in an arc that hit the brass cuspidor with the accuracy of a marksman. Which way?

At his age he could hardly forsake the good life he had built up here, abandon the people who looked to him for leadership, guidance, and financial support, an all-Negro community where his word was as good as law; where, as long as his people stayed within certain limits, they could enjoy a freedom far greater than Mordecai had ever experienced in any other part of the South or, for that matter, in the North. His reluctance to partner with a white man was great and the heavy perspiration on his forehead and face bespoke his unwillingness to deal with this man.

"Well?" Hickman asked finally.

"I don' know, Mist' Sher'ff. I don' rightly know," Mordecai replied.

"You don't, Mordecai? Well, just let me help you figure this here thing out for you. Right now you're operatin' an illegal still over there in the Swamp. I coulda raided you any of a dozen times the last year or so, wrecked every last piece of equipment, throwed you in jail. Then what would all them women and kids a-yourn be doin' to get along? Or I could call in the federal men and you'd be in a federal prison for a long time and a long way off from here.

"My way, we make the operation a big one, run businesslike, with proper warehousing and distribution all over the state and into some bordering states as well. All you got to worry about is production. We'll worry about supplyin' you with the sugar and meal and the yeast and bottles and everything else, including the delivery. You just keep on producin' good corn whiskey and you keep livin' the way you been, with as many women as you can pile in your bed at one time every night, and food for all your kids and all the other comforts and conveniences you'll be able to have because you'll have a lot of men workin' for you.

"Now how do you feel about it, Mordecai?"

Mordecai Buckey shook his head in doubt. "Ah need time to think it over, Mist' Sher'ff."

"Why, sure, Mordecai," the sheriff agreed affably. "You don't have to jump into a thing like this with a snap decision." He pulled out a heavy gold watch and dangled it by the long thick chain. It spun around several times before it stopped so he could read it. "Right now it's twenty minutes to eleven." He turned the face of

the watch toward Buckey. "You give me your answer by eleven. That's when this big hand here is sittin' right smack on the twelve, up there, and this little hand here—"

"I kin tell the time, Mist' Sher'ff," Mordecai said unhappily.

10.

The deal was made quietly and peacefully. Mordecai, with the weight of procurement and distribution removed from his shoulders, was happy and satisfied to concentrate on manufacture and to begin to build a bigger, better-equipped plant in the Swamp on a piece of high, dry ground that he had reserved for the future. Now he would share that future with Sheriff Lud Hickman, whom he believed to be the man at the top because he was the man who had the power of the law on his side.

"If'n you got to have any truck wif a white man," he ruminated philosophically, "better to have 'em wif you 'stead of agin you."

It took ten months to gather the necessary materials and supplies to build the new distillery, one that any whiskey-maker, legal or otherwise, would be proud of. It would produce better than 2000 gallons of fine quality whiskey every five working days. There were six fermenting vats, professional boilers, pumps, hoses with special pressure nozzles for filling bottles and jugs quickly. There was a box-making shop to manufacture the cases in which the white lightning would be shipped out. There was underground storage for sugar, meal, and yeast; a special runway to deliver the cases to the narrow flatboats and pirogues that would take the whiskey out of the Swamp, across the Welcome above Buckeytown where trucks would, on prearranged signal, be supplied to remove the goods to one of several warehouses or be delivered to a distant distributor.

It was an efficient operation. At times, while making deliveries, when the drivers would be stopped by a deputy sheriff of another county, certain words would be exchanged, a special card of identification flashed, and they would be on their way. Hickman had set up an efficient long link of communication that extended over county lines and state borders.

The federal men came again and again, but Hickman would notify Mordecai in advance, and all operations would halt temporarily and deliveries would be made from prestocked distant warehouses while Lud and his deputies led the federal officers into the Swamp on a wild-goose chase, returning after hours of useless poling up and down the coiling waterways. Occasionally Hickman would draw the men off to a small still operation or two in another

part of the county where the federals would smash stills and make several arrests, but these were generally prearranged and the men found to be first offenders, and so would receive a light sentence from judges who were not entirely sympathetic with the unpopular prohibition laws. Once the federal men were out of the area, operations would resume at full scale and with renewed vigor.

In the prohibition year of 1924 the still operation was running at maximum capacity and the need for better organization had become paramount in importance. Procurement of raw materials, sugar in particular, was becoming difficult—they could not buy locally in such great quantities without bringing direct suspicion down upon themselves, for the federal agents were watching for buyers of sugar and yeast in overly large lots. Corn—grown, harvested, and ground into meal locally—was no problem. And so the distributors of the finished product in distant towns and cities to the north and south were ordered to collect sugar and yeast in small quantities and store it, so that Hickman's men could pick it up when they delivered a truckload of whiskey; else there might be no further shipments to that particular distributor. Soon this system became too unwieldy. The operation was in need of a central management, procurement, and distributing office, headed by a man with experience in such matters.

Hickman began to make discreet inquiries among his distributors in the larger cities farther south. One night, on returning to his office from supper, Lud found a stranger waiting in his outer office, a tall, ruggedly built man with hard, bronzed, granitelike features to match his gray-streaked hair and tight-lipped mouth. Cliff Dady, the deputy on duty, motioned his head toward the man and said, "Wants to see you, Lud. Nobody else'll do."

The man looked up, saw Lud examining him, then stood up for the mutual appraisal.

"Who're you?" Lud asked.

"Can we talk in private, Sheriff?"

"About what?"

"About a thing a good friend of mine tells me you're interested."

"And who is your good friend?" Lud demanded.

"Joe Cannelino. New Orleans."

Lud's grim, tight expression relaxed into a smile. "Sure. Sure," he said. "Come on inside."

In Lud's overcrowded office the man sank into the old, worn leather chair and took out two huge cigars, offering one to Lud, who accepted and held a light from a stick match for the visitor,

meanwhile taking a more careful inventory of his visitor. There was a foreign, or old world, look about him despite the expensive, beautifully tailored suit he wore. His linen was immaculate, shoes hand-sewn. But no amount of cover could hide the toughness of his face, the shrewd look in his eyes, the workman's hands, the widespreading shoulders under fine raiment. In his time he had seen much hard work, Lud knew.

"What you got on your mind, Mister?" Lud asked when they had taken their first puffs and their cigars were drawing well.

The man spoke bluntly, harshly, in perfect character with his appearance. "My name is Tamburo Nariocas. I am Greek-born American citizen. I come to the United States when I am seventeen years old. I am forty-four now. I work on road gangs, in sewers, in ditches. I drive trucks, sell newspapers, anything, everything. Anything to make a dollar. Prohibition come, I drive beer trucks for the big guys in New York. I move up. I am chief distributor for Dutch Schultz." He laughed with some irony in his voice. "You hear of Dutch Schultz, Sheriff? I work for Buggsy McManus, Jerry Carroll, Big Butch Condon. I make a lot of money, but other guys, they try to take over my job. When all the shoot and kill begins, I take all my money and I quit. I come to New Orleans where I got a few friends. I go in another business. I buy up some fast boats to unload the big ships off the twelve-mile limit. I bring in scotch and other fine whiskey and brandy from Europe, real champagne; the rum from Jamaica, Haiti, Cuba, the other islands. All straight stuff. No cutting operation in between buy and sell. Okay. Two month ago I get caught by the law. First time in my life. I quit. Sell my boats to a good friend and quit."

"Law still lookin' for you?" Lud asked. The man hesitated and Lud smiled. "You can tell me about it or not, but I got ways to find out. Better for you if I don't have to go asking questions around. The Feds might smell a mouse."

"Okay, Sheriff. The Feds. I jump bail. I tell you because Joe, he tell me I can tell you anything."

"I guess you know you just put my hands around your throat, tellin' me what you just did?" Lud smiled crookedly.

Nariocas returned the smile, but there was a cold crispness in his words that belied any friendliness. "Sure," he said. "I know. Also, I know Joe can tell the Feds how you operate, where you get yeast, sugar, who you sell to. Also again, I got young brother. He is what you call clean. Nobody got anything on him. You turn me over to the Feds and one night Johnny come up here and kill you. You don't know him, so you can't stop him. Simple, no?"

Lud smiled. "Okay, Tam. I guess we understand each other. I think we can do business together."

So began the relationship that, within a short time, would bring order to what had most certainly been heading for chaos. From it evolved a "syndicate" operation, headed by Sheriff Hickman and Dan Cornell. It would receive its profits from the whiskey-making and distributing organization for the protection it furnished the manufacturers, distributors, and retail sellers, all of which came under the jurisdiction of Tam Nariocas and his younger brother, Johnny Norris. In another division Hickman would exact a "reasonable percentage" from every gambling, prostitution, and other illegal operation for "value received," or protection, against others who tried to invade these lucrative fields.

Marcus Radford's name must never be used in any manner to connect him with the syndicate, from which would come the money needed to build a strong political organization and increase the patronage he would receive, in exchange for the votes he controlled, both countywide and statewide. Votes, the lifeblood of politicians. Patronage, the lifeblood of political appointments. And when, five years later, the Great Depression would sweep over the nation, it would be this same kind of money that would help the people, the whites with the vote and the Negroes without the vote, over their worst moments. It would give them food and clothing and shelter, provide seed for home-grown garden crops, pigs and fowl.

Some would call it "white lightning charity," and it was said by others that Regis was living on a "corn economy," but the needy accepted this generosity as coming from Marcus Radford personally when it was handed out by ward and district leaders, especially before primary elections when they were reminded, in subtle or, if necessary, harsh ways, to whom they owed their loyalty and support—a relative who might be working in a much-needed job for a certain county or state office might be dropped at the lift of a finger. But this was hardly necessary. The people were grateful and took the pre-notated sample ballots that Marcus Radford's organization furnished into the voting booths; and when the count was in, Marcus knew they had voted his way.

11.

In 1926 an election problem arose and Marcus Radford was summoned to Chancellor for a political meeting with the state committee. What he had assumed would take a matter of hours had be-

gun to run into days, a tiresome affair with much bickering within party ranks. There was little that could be done until after the main points had been made and the recalcitrant members of the committee prodded into cooperation.

Back in Regis, Sheriff Lud Hickman, in need of additional personal funds, and feeling his own power increase with Marcus's continued absence, made a call on Tam Nariocas. Lud went up the back stairs to Tam's second-floor office above the poolroom and rapped out a short one-two-one signal on the door. Tam nodded to Johnny, who shot the double bolt to admit the sheriff.

"Hello, Lud," Tam welcomed. "You just in time. Johnny brought in a shipment from New Orleans. You like fine cognac? Here, take a bottle with you to try."

Lud took the bottle Tam had extracted from a case beside his desk, lifted the straw housing from it, eyed it suspiciously. "You sure this didn't make a stop at a cutting plant on the way up?"

Johnny bristled. "Listen, Sheriff, I took this stuff off the ship myself. I watched it every inch of the way from—"

Tam laughed. "He's only what-you-call-it, needle you, Johnny. Look, kid, why don't you go ahead with the run while Lud and me, we visit?"

"Sure," Johnny said, mollified by his brother's good humor. "See you in the morning, Tam. So long, Sheriff." He went out through the back door. "Lock it behind me, will you, Tam?"

Tam shot the bolts into place and went back to his desk, puzzled by a daylight visit from the sheriff. "Lud?" he said quizzically.

Hickman sprawled in his chair, holding the bottle of cognac up to the light to catch the clearness of the liquid. He straightened up in the cane-back chair, tilted it back against the wall at almost the same angle that his hat was slanted back on his head.

"It's like this, Tam," he said. "Come the first of the month, which is day after tomorrow, you got to increase our end of the deal by five percent."

Nariocas swung his thick body around quickly, a swift flush of anger deepening the color of his already darkly tinged skin. "Five more percent? You already take thirty percent, plus bonuses every once in a while for *emergencies* and *political campaigns* and *retirement funds* and *insurance* and I don't know what other kind of programs. All I know is, you got your hand on the faucet and when you want money you think all you got to do is turn it. Look, Lud, you can't run a business like this one the way you run a gambling joint or a whorehouse. It's got to be run like a legitimate business.

I got payoffs to make all over the state, both ways from Regis. Every son-of-a-bitch in every county I do business in gets an itchy finger and puts the muscle on me and I got to stand for it because I don't know if he's got a real lock on me or not. I raise you another five percent and where the hell am I? I can't raise my wholesale price five or ten percent to get even, can I? There's too many guys operating north and south of here who could step in and cut me out."

"Can't help it, Tam," Hickman said blandly. "Five percent more."

"Just like that, huh? Goddamn it, Lud, you're like the rest of 'em. Walk in, sit down, say, 'I want another five percent of your business.' What the hell's the matter with you? You ain't gettin' enough from the gamblers, the madams, the dope pushers? You got to put the extra bite on me all the time, for Chrissakes?"

Hickman let the front legs of the chair come down. He stood up and put the bottle of cognac on the table beside him, bent over and picked the straw shield out of the wastepaper basket and dropped it like a tent over the bottle, leaving it there. He went to the door and pulled the two bolts back, then turned and peered closely at Nariocas through squinted eyes. Now he hiked his cartridge-studded pistol belt up around his waist and shot a brown jet of tobacco juice into the wastepaper basket. Tam watched him with cold anger as Lud turned, pulled the door open, and stepped outside.

"Lud!" Tam called after him. "Hey, Lud, wait! Listen!"

But Hickman neither waited nor listened.

On the following morning, a Sunday, Marcus was asleep in his suite at the Randolph when he was awakened by a telephone call from Regis. It was Dan Cornell.

"You'd better get on back to Regis, Marcus," Dan told him.

"Why? What the hell's so important you've got to wake a man up at this ungodly hour of morning?"

"Plenty's the matter. Our thickheaded and numskulled sheriff knocked over Tam Nariocas' warehouses at two different places in the county and confiscated two loaded trucks. Tam's blood-red mad. Claims Lud was trying to shake him down for an extra five percent on the side."

Marcus was wide awake now, sitting up in bed. "Lud? That stupid jughead! I knew I should have dumped him last election. Where the hell is the idiot now?"

"I don't know, Marcus. I've tried just about everywhere in town. I think he's hiding out."

"Has he got Tam locked up?"

"No. Tam's out trying to find somebody to set bail and get his boys out. His brother Johnny was driving one of the trucks to Crisfield when they picked him up. He's in jail with five others. Tam's a red-hot tiger right about now."

"And why not, for God's sake? Dan, get hold of Hadley and tell him to—"

"Marc," Cornell's voice was tinged with slow patience, "that's exactly why I'm calling you. You'll have to get into the picture. Hadley Vincent won't touch it. I went to him as soon as Tam called me. Your sanctimonious father-in-law looked up at me over his coffeecup and told me that people like Tam Nariocas and his kind should be kept in jail for life. Gave me all of that crap right there in front of your mother-in-law as though I were some kind of low-grade moron being lectured on juvenile morals. Also, he's passed the word around and the other judges are laying low, too. They think that if that's how Hadley wants it, it must be because you passed the word down to him."

Marcus bit his lips in annoyance while Cornell told him the story. This was the first disruption in what had been an otherwise quiet and profitable association. Now one man's personal greed threatened to dissolve the entire operation, blow it open publicly, and conceivably disclose his own part in the syndicate. "All right, Dan," he said finally, "I'll come back on the afternoon train. You get hold of Tam and tell him. Call the house and have Newton meet me at the train. I want to go to Hadley's and see him first. I'll have Johnny and the rest of them out within an hour after I get there."

The train ride back to Regis seemed to take forever and Marcus was in a vile mood riding alone in his compartment. He snorted in anger, cursed Lud Hickman and Hadley Vincent under his breath, flung himself from one part of the seat to the other, could not bring himself to eat, and chain-smoked his way through the balance of the trip.

Arriving at the station, he got into his car and ordered Newton to drive him to his father-in-law's house. Hadley had been expecting Marcus, because when the Negro manservant announced him in the upstairs sitting room, the judge was supported on one side of the sofa by his wife, Jessica, on the other by his daughter, Martha-Louise, Marcus's wife.

"I know why you've come, Marcus," the judge said in his most

seriously judicial tone as he rose to greet his son-in-law, "but I have made up my mind that this syndicate, or combine, or whatever it is called, is an unhealthy thing for the community and it must be gotten rid of. People like you, myself, the leaders in the community, must set an example and purge—"

"Judge," Marcus said coldly, clipping off the words so that there would be no mistaking his serious intent, "you'd better sit down again and listen to me. I'll just ask your good wife and mine to leave us so we can discuss this in private. If you want them to stay, it's all right with me, but there are going to be a few truths spoken that you might find—"

"My husband has nothing to fear from the truth," Mrs. Vincent said stiffly. Marcus ignored her, kept his eyes on Hadley's face.

"Judge?" Marcus said harshly.

"I—I think—perhaps you and Martha-Louise had better wait for us downstairs," the judge said to his wife.

"Anything that Marcus has to say, I am prepared to hear. And so is Martha-Louise. After all—"

"Judge," Marcus's voice cut across her words incisively, "I think you'd better insist. What they hear might very well be unfit for the ears of the *better* class of citizens of this community you've been describing to me."

Martha-Louise said, "Marcus—" It was clearly a warning.

Without looking at her, Marcus said, "Not now, Martha-Louise."

Judge Vincent took Jessica by the elbow and propelled her gently toward the door. Martha-Louise stood up and looked coldly at Marcus. "Don't you dare do anything to hurt him, Marcus," she said. "I know how ruthless you can be when you want to—"

Marcus said coldly, "Whatever happens to your father depends entirely on him, Martha-Louise. Entirely on him. He can make it just as easy or just as tough as he pleases. You go home and stay with Bethann. I'll come as soon as I'm finished with this business."

She swung away from him without answering, followed her mother out.

Judge Vincent returned to the center of the room, hardly as confident now as he had been while being bolstered by the presence of his wife and daughter. Marcus looked at his father-in-law with a grimace and said, "If you've got anything to drink, you'd better take one. This isn't going to be pleasant for either of us."

"Don't worry about me, Marcus," the judge said with false bravado. "Whatever you have to say, say away."

"Very well, your honor. Number one. You are a self-seeking fraud,

a hypocrite, a thief, and no better than the men whom you would run out of this county."

The judge's head snapped backward as though Marcus had struck him a hard physical blow. His mouth opened in shock, his eyes bulged in disbelief, and a trembling began in his hands that ran up his arms into his shoulders. He put a hand out and grasped the arm of the sofa, but there was no strength left in it and it slipped downward on the seat.

"Get yourself settled, Judge Vincent, and hear me out. When I married Martha-Louise, you were just barely scratching out a living as a lawyer. I threw you a lot of business as my father-in-law that you couldn't have gotten otherwise in a million years. I gave you a part of my legal business and put you out in front so far, both financially and with respectability, that it was easy for me to put you up for judge.

"You sit up on that bench and smile down on the poor and rich alike because you've got what all men want—money and power—a power that lets you do things with men and women that no man other than a judge can do. You can decide borderline cases either way and make yourself a really big man with those whose good opinion you want or need, can't you, Hadley? Now you tell me this: how much money have you been making aside from your salary as a judge? Go on, Hadley, you tell me. Your wife and daughter aren't in the room so you needn't be afraid. *Tell me, goddamn it!*"

Vincent paled and a shaking hand came upward to wipe the beads of perspiration that had gathered on his forehead. "Are—are you—accusing me of—taking—taking—?"

"Go ahead and say it, Hadley. Or are you afraid of the word?"

Vincent fell backward against the sofa, seeming to cave in completely, his lips moving slowly, but issuing no words.

"You want me to tell you, do you?" Marcus went on. "Let me help you a little, your *honor*. You never did know, did you, that Ame-Regis Contracting Corporation, that does most of the building for the city and county in and around Regis, is owned by Marcus Audrey Radford, did you? That the fee AmeRegis has been paying you secretly for the last four years, \$15,000 a year for 'consultation,' has been coming out of *my* pocket—so nice and quiet and refined and unethical, for an occasional opinion or perhaps to decide certain cases in its favor. And about two years back when Ed Dance's boy was up for killing Doc Crandall with a knife over a gambling row, you know who put up the \$6000 in cash you found in that envelope with a note telling you it was yours if you made it self-defense?"

I did. And let me ask you one more question: have you been paying your federal income taxes on that graft?

"Now do you want to sit there and tell me again how evil Tam Nariocas and his brother are? Or me? Or are you going to get up and come downtown with me and set bail for Johnny and Tam's other boys so we can get them turned loose?"

Vincent made no move. Marcus waited, letting the force of his words settle, then said, "I'll tell you just one more time: get up this minute and come with me or else I'll go out and get another judge to do it for me. But if you force me to do that, your career as a judge will be over for good. Here or anywhere else. I'll cut your throat the same as I would that of any other man who bucks up against me." He laughed with a note of bitterness. "You couldn't let things go along the way they were, could you? You and your wife are so goddamned superior that you had to show everybody how strong and independent you were, even to going up against Marcus Radford. Well, Hadley, how about it?"

Vincent looked up at Marcus, his eyes glazed. "You—you're going to—expose me—Marcus? Throw me out?" he said in a small broken whisper of a voice.

"Hell, Hadley, whatever happens now, you've got only yourself to blame. Are you coming downtown with me? Right now?"

"If I do, will you forget this happened?"

"What I do from here on in, Hadley, you'll have to guess at. You've known me long enough to know how little use I've got for a man I can't trust." Marcus snorted in disgust. "My own father-in-law! Who can you trust in this world if not the people you've done the most for?"

He walked to the door and turned the handle, pulled it toward himself. Mrs. Hadley Vincent backed away from her listening post, her face a burning red, hate-filled eyes staring first at Marcus, then past him to the judge.

"You're going—with—him?" she said to the judge in her most brittle tones.

"I—I'm going into town—got—to—set the bail—for those—men," Vincent stumbled through the words without looking at his wife.

Marcus said, "And when they come up for trial, they'll come up on your calendar. I'll see to that. And you're going to throw the case out by reason of illegal seizure or insufficient evidence. You know how to do that, don't you?"

"But—Sheriff Hickman? What about him?"

"Don't you worry about our good old friend Lud. I'll make you

a small wager that Lud won't be around to testify by that time and the deputies who made the raids will swear they did so on Lud's word alone that he had the warrants, while all the time he didn't."

The judge nodded his head, turned to a white-faced, speechless Jessica. "I'll be home by nine o'clock," he said.

Marcus added, "Tell Martha-Louise I'll be home as soon as we finish our business in town. I'll expect her to be home when I get there."

As the door closed behind them, Jessica Vincent sank to the sofa and began to sob quietly to herself.

12.

It was a little past nine o'clock and raining hard when Marcus returned to Radford Hall. Bethann, then nearing five, heard his voice on the lower floor, asking Sudie for Martha-Louise. She ran down the steps and he caught her in his arms, lifting her high above his head several times before lowering her for a kiss.

"What are you doing up this hour of the night, young lady?" he asked.

"I couldn't sleep, Daddy. The rain keeps me awake and Mommy wasn't home to kiss me good night and you haven't been home for 'most a whole week."

"Mommy isn't home?"

"No, suh," Sudie said. "She went ovuh to her muthuh's house early this afternoon an' tha's the las' I seen a her."

"All right, Sudie. You and Newton can lock up. I'll take Miss Bethann up to bed and kiss her good night. Will that be all right, sweetheart?"

"And you'll tell me a story?"

"I'll do that. And tomorrow, when I unpack my things, I'll have a nice present for you that I brought from Chancellor."

Marcus carried Bethann up the stairs to her room, listening to her try to maneuver him into unpacking his bags at once in order to get her present then and not have to wait until tomorrow. He put her in her bed and began to tell her a story, meanwhile leaving the door to her room open so he might hear if Martha-Louise came in. He sat in the chair beside the small bed, the one in which Martha-Louise would sit each night to tell Bethann her favorite stories, his body now heavy with tiredness, his mind weary and churning with the happenings of the long, tiring day. Soon Bethann was asleep. The rain began to come down harder and Marcus stirred himself

long enough to close the window, pull the covers up over Bethann. He went to his room where he lay down on the bed fully clothed except for his shoes, and fell asleep.

He felt a few wet drops fall upon him and woke up, startled by the apparition of Martha-Louise in rain-dampened cloak, standing over him, staring at him in unsheathed hatred.

"Where—what time is it?" he asked.

"Late. Very late," she replied in a low, angry voice.

He stood up and pulled his watch from his vest pocket, held it toward the doorway for light. "Five o'clock!" he gasped. "Where have you been until now?"

She glared at him, then turned away and walked out into the lighted hallway. Marcus followed her. "I asked you a question. Where have you been until five o'clock in the morning?"

"At my father's house," she replied, her voice dull and icily calm. "My *late* father's house."

"Your—what—?"

"My *late* father's house. He's dead. My father is dead."

"Dead? Hadley—dead? How?"

"He shot himself in the barn. But it was as much your finger on that trigger as it was his, Marcus Radford. My father. My *father*. *You murdered my father! You!*"

Marcus took her arms in his hands and gripped her tightly, shook her. "If your father is dead, if he shot himself, it was his own doing. I didn't force him to do it."

"Take your hands off me, Marcus Radford," she said with a steely hardness in her tone as she wrenched away from him. "*Take your hands off me or I'll kill you!*" She waited until her composure returned. "Now you remember this, Marcus Radford. You've touched me for the last time. I came home to pack some clothes. I'm going back to my mother's house. And I'm going to take Bethann with me. And that is the last you'll ever see of either of us!"

Marcus shook his head. "I won't try to stop you from leaving me if that's what you want, Martha-Louise, but you will not take Bethann out of this house. She is going to remain here. If you want to leave, go ahead and my blessings go with you. But Bethann is my daughter and she is going to live in her home, grow up in it, and one day be married here."

"You'll see, Marcus Radford. You'll see," Martha-Louise cried.

She ran back toward Bethann's room, but Marcus was faster than the distraught woman and caught her as she reached the doorway. He held her firmly and she screamed out at the top of her voice; and

then he looked down into the open doorway and saw Bethann, her eyes opened wide with fright, peering upward at them.

"Daddy! Mommy!" she cried out.

Marcus released Martha-Louise. "Don't be frightened, Bethann," he said, kneeling to her. "Mommy and Daddy were only playing." He picked Bethann up and kissed her, turned her toward her mother so that she, too, could kiss the child.

"There, see, honey," he tried to calm her hysteria-shaken little body. "Mommy has been out in the rain and is going to her room to change into some dry clothes. Let's you and me go back to your room and I'll put you back to bed."

Martha-Louise turned quickly and went to their room. Marcus tucked Bethann into the small bed, sat and talked with her while she tried to fall asleep again. He heard Martha-Louise's footsteps in the hallway later and got up to close the door to Bethann's room. Martha-Louise stood in the doorway, fully dressed, carrying a small case with her. He stepped into the hall and closed the door.

"I'm leaving, Marcus," Martha-Louise said.

"Very well," Marcus said calmly. "If you can leave me and your daughter and your home, it is of your own doing. I won't try to stop you."

"This doesn't end the matter, you know."

"As far as I am concerned it will be ended the moment you step outside this house."

Martha-Louise walked down the steps to the ground floor. Before she could call for Newton he came out of his room fully dressed, and even in this moment of stress she could not help thinking with amazement how mysteriously these Negroes could keep out of sight and yet know everything that went on. Without a word Newton went up the stairs and in a few moments was back with two large suitcases, taking them out by the back way to the car.

"Martha-Louise," Marcus called sharply.

She did not reply, but merely turned around and looked up toward the top landing where he stood.

"For the last time," Marcus said, "I ask you to reconsider. Five minutes from now may be too late."

She stared at him coldly. "Please have Sudie pack the rest of my things. I'll ask Newton to bring them to me sometime tomorrow," she replied acidly.

13.

In the morning all Regis was shocked awake with the news that Judge Hadley Vincent was dead, victim of an accident while clean-

ing a target pistol in the small workshop behind the Vincent home. The daily *Herald* published a three-column paragraph and two full columns of obituary covering the life and accomplishments of the judge. There were photographs of Marcus Radford, one of Jessica Vincent, and another of Martha-Louise taken at the time of her marriage to Marcus. An editorial deplored the carelessness with which people so frequently regarded "empty" weapons, reminding all that such carelessness was no respecter of persons regardless of station, as evidence the fact that the county had been robbed of so brilliant a jurist, so fine a gentleman, husband, and father as Judge Hadley Vincent.

From nearby Carvel the evening *Sun*, long opposed to Marcus Radford, published a three-paragraph story, limiting itself to one small photograph of the judge, a brief history of his family background, which it considered of far greater importance than his achievements as a jurist, his ascent to the superior court bench "with the aid of his son-in-law, Marcus Radford, a man with a powerful voice in the matter of such patronage appointments." There followed the coroner's report of accidental death.

Martha-Louise remained at the Vincent home for a week to comfort her mother and greet family friends who called to pay their condolences. Marcus visited daily, remained for perhaps fifteen minutes or more, then left to go to his office at the bank. This was sufficient, he thought, to display his duty to his father-in-law; he refused to bring Bethann to visit her mother or grandmother.

When the period of mourning was over, Martha-Louise was faced with the impossible problem of what to do with herself, with her life. Jessica Vincent was determined to close her house in Regis and return to Atlanta to live with her two older sisters. She urged Martha-Louise to go with her, but Martha-Louise knew two things her mother seemed to be overlooking. First, she would never be able to stand living with her mother and her two aunts, of whom she had had an overdose while she was attending private school in Atlanta; second, if she gave up Marcus and Radford Hall, she would be giving up Bethann.

She realized that Bethann's attachment for Marcus was strong, even stronger than for herself, since there had been an early period when Martha-Louise had been unable to adjust to the competition of a daughter and resented the attentions showered upon Bethann by Hadley and Jessica, Marcus, their friends, and the two Negro servants, Sudie and Newton. Now there was the strong suspicion present that if Bethann were given a choice, she would in all probability elect to remain at the Hall with Marcus, Sudie, and Newton.

Martha-Louise decided, then, to remain. There was a short, bitter, and tearful scene between herself and Jessica, followed by her mother's departure for Atlanta and Martha-Louise's return to Radford Hall, for once happy to be out of the gloomy funereal atmosphere of the Vincent home. She came displaying open affection for both Bethann and a suspicious Marcus, and later that night showed a tender willingness that momentarily lulled Marcus into believing that an even greater, more important change had taken place; but as she lay in his arms, taut and rigid with the old fear, Marcus realized that this was no more than a sham, that she was merely exchanging her body for a chance to take up her life again as mistress of Radford Hall.

And then, after several months of cool peace, Martha-Louise learned another horrifying, almost unspeakable truth.

She was pregnant again.

Nothing, not her husband, daughter, nor her status in Regis, was worth the memory of the months during which she had carried Bethann, hiding in her room, refusing to appear in public even when there was as yet no sign of a change in her figure. Nothing was worth the well-remembered morning sickness, the queasiness that was with her constantly. Martha-Louise wept, but this time it was alone, with no mother to whom she could run for sympathy. Her temper became short, her tone snappish to Marcus, her impatience with the servants such that on several occasions she lashed out at Sudie and once even struck Newton. Marcus took her to task for her ungovernable actions and she turned her querulous, nagging tongue on him. In self-defense Marcus took to spending many of his evenings in town, and when the opportunity afforded, would go to Chancellor "on business." Until she began to show noticeable size, she refused to admit to Marcus that she was pregnant, and when finally he deduced this condition for himself and tried to show his concern for her, she locked herself into her own room and would admit only Sudie for the purpose of bringing her meals and freshening up the room.

Marcus, meanwhile, was secretly elated. He had made no secret of his desire for a son to follow in his footsteps, a son to inherit the world of wealth and grandeur he would one day leave behind. He spoke to Dr. Sam Roland about Martha-Louise, but the young doctor was reluctant to enter the case without consent of the patient. "At any rate," he told Marcus, "it is still early enough, and perhaps within a little time has passed, she will ask for me."

But Sam Roland did not know or understand the true extent of

Martha-Louise's underlying hatred for Marcus, or her determination to confer no such great favor upon him, her desperate need to find some means to rob him, to perpetrate the perfect revenge on him, keep this child from him.

During one of Marcus's trips away from Regis, Martha-Louise took to driving her car about at dusk, returning in the dark of night, all to the distress of Newton, who begged her to allow him to drive her. When she received word that Marcus would return to Regis on a certain day, she again went out in her car and returned very late that night. And on the following night Sudie came running to Marcus's room, waking him, crying, "Th' mist'iss, Mist' Marcus, the mist'iss! She pow'ful sick an' needy. You better come fas' an' call the doctuh man!"

Sudie was not one to become alarmed without cause, and Marcus knew that whatever the matter, it was serious. He phoned Dr. Roland first and told him to hurry. He then went to Martha-Louise, found her tossing feverishly in her bed, her beautiful face twisted in agony, her nightgown ripped to shreds. Sudie was trying to apply compresses to her forehead, but Martha-Louise tore them away. She began to groan and scream as the pain increased. By the time Sam Roland arrived and took a first look, Marcus knew her condition was grave. Roland sent him from the room, asked Sudie to remain with him.

In the hallway, as Marcus closed the door to Martha-Louise's room, he found Bethann, dressed in a thin nightgown, outside, crying.

"What is it, baby girl'?" Marcus asked, picking her up in his arms.

"Mommy. Why is Mommy crying?"

"She's sick, honey. What are you doing out of your bed?"

"The rain woke me up, Daddy. The rain scares me."

"I'll come with you, sweetheart. Will that be all right?"

He carried her back to her room, and with no more than one telling of Jack and the Beanstalk, she was asleep again. The rain began to fall harder and a high wind rose behind it and Bethann woke up crying.

"Mommy," she said. "Mommy is crying again."

"No, baby girl. It's only the wind and the rain you hear."

Sudie came into the room at that moment and motioned Marcus to go into Martha-Louise's room. "Ah take care ob th' li'l one," she said.

Martha-Louise was so completely quiet Marcus thought she was

unconscious. "I gave her something to help put her to sleep, Marcus," Sam Roland said.

"What is it, Sam? It seemed to come on so suddenly. She wasn't this way at all with Bethann."

Sam Roland shook his head grimly and said, "It doesn't matter now, Marcus. I've got to get her to the hospital if we are going to save her life. I've already telephoned for an ambulance. I only hope we can make it in time."

"Sam, for heaven's sake, in her condition—"

Roland said soberly, "Marcus, Martha-Louise isn't pregnant any longer."

Marcus seemed stunned with the news. "A miscarriage?"

Roland shook his head. "No, Marcus, not that. Some son-of-a-bitch performed an abortion on her and at this very moment she's dying of infection and I can't do a damned thing about it unless we can get her into surgery. Even then, it will be a close call. Damned close."

"Abortion!"

"Abortion," Roland repeated. "The most primitive kind of thing with filthy hands and probably with an unsterilized tool of some sort. We've seen it before. Generally it's one of those things that takes place in a dirty shack over in Buckeytown somewhere."

Marcus went into the room just as Martha-Louise was coming out of the sedation, writhing with pain. She saw Marcus, symbol of all she hated in life.

"Murderer!" She shrieked at the top of her voice. "Murderer! You killed my father and drove my mother away from me! I swore I would never give you the son you wanted. You forced me, Marcus Radford, but I've tricked you in the end. This time I've tricked you and there won't be a son to carry your name!"

She died a little after four that morning, following a series of piercing screams. The ambulance arrived a few seconds later and Sam Roland went down to send the men back to the hospital. Marcus came out of Martha-Louise's room and saw Bethann standing near the doorway, tears streaming down her face. Marcus went to her, but she ran back to her room and climbed into her bed, facing the wall away from him, sobbing violently.

14.

By the early thirties Lud Hickman and his successor were almost entirely erased from local memory. Lud, permitted to resign after the Vincent incident, had been replaced by Linus Trafton, but Linus

became too greedy too quickly and learned much too late that his chief deputy, Will Bartly, had been trailing him in private for Marcus Radford, so that Marcus knew almost to the penny how much cash had been paid to him. And so, when the total of Linus Trafton's embezzlements began to reach the five-figure mark, the word was passed and Sheriff Trafton signed a witnessed confession to malfeasance in office and was permitted to resign, provided he would leave the state within forty-eight hours. Thus Willis Bartly was appointed to wear the sheriff's badge temporarily, and with Marcus Radford's backing, was later elected to the job for a four-year term.

Bartly was a roly-poly, pink-tinted man of such strongly porcine characteristics that he was known—secretly, of course—as Hog-snout. He was bald, short and round, and wore high-heeled boots and a high-crowned hat, as if this could make up for his deficiency in height. There was a certain amount of effeminacy in his manner that he seemed to be trying to hide, or overcome, and it was perhaps for this reason that he was overly careless in his shaving and dress habits; also, as if to prove his manliness, he was more cruel than was considered necessary in the apprehending or questioning of a white prisoner of lower status, or a Negro, as if this made up for his lack of masculinity in appearance and manner.

Within a short time Bartly chose as his chief deputy a man of somewhat mysterious background, one who had worked as a deputy in Regis for only three years. Hessie Loomis was not originally from Regis County, nor, to the knowledge of anyone, from the state. During the time he had been on the sheriff's payroll, he had been known to be efficient, able, and devoted to duty. But in that time he had made no friends, either among his fellow employees or among the citizens in the community.

Except for Willis Bartly.

It was as though Bartly found in Loomis all the qualities he admired in another and lacked in himself. It may have been Bartly's unsuccessful marriages, three in all, in which each wife had packed up and left him suddenly, as if fleeing from Satan himself.

After Hessie Loomis was raised to chief deputy, he moved into Bartly's house, and there was much snickering and backroom comment, wondering if Loomis would last longer than the others. But the Loomis-Bartly arrangement had far outlived the previous tenants in Bartly's home, and in time the talk died down.

Hessie Loomis ranged upward to some three inches over the six-foot mark, a rangy, hard man. In dress he aped the style of Texas, rumored to be his mother state, from the rolled brim of his low-

crowned Stetson and fancy-piped shirts to his expensive high-heeled boots. He wore his gun slung low from his left hip, its butt faced forward, holster tied tightly around his left thigh by a leather thong in the approved manner of the Western gunfighter.

Loomis's most distinguishing characteristics were his rolling gait, the feline stealth of a cat—or tiger—and an almost inhuman and brittle coldness in his eyes that immediately typed him as a completely humorless man who could inspire fear with little more than a glance. His nose had been broken numerous times, the result of frequent fistic encounters in which he seemed to enjoy the physical contact of administering a beating as well as taking one, and little effort had ever been made to correct the twisted ugliness of his most prominent facial feature. He seldom smiled, and on the rare occasions when he did, one could observe the dental caverns that gaped darkly in testimony of contact with an adversary's bunched knuckles. His own knuckles were masses of broken bone, and these, unless otherwise engaged, habitually massaged each other.

Hessie's hairline came to a sharp point in the center of his forehead only a scant inch and a half above a pair of heavy, black eyebrows. His eyes were set back deeply in his skull and were hardly visible when the shaggy hair of his brows formed a deep frown. He had prominent cheekbones and sunken cheeks, thin lips that were generally drawn downward in a curving, grim line. His penetrating look was seldom more than a mere glance, a wintry, efficient appraisal; and one could feel the cruelty of him in a single, searing look. A quick summation would declare him an ugly man, which is not to say that an ugly man is entirely without some redeeming features, such as good humor, friendliness, a certain warmth or charm; but Loomis had none of these saving characteristics. His ugliness, apart from what was visible on the surface, came from within, and with it a complete package of personality markings that stamped him indelibly for what he was: a cruel, sadistic, viciously brutal man without regard or human kindness or love for man, woman, child, or animal. It was said of Hessie Loomis that he was a lot different than Sheriff Will Bartly; and in Buckeytown one Negro added laconically, "Sho. Like a cottonmouth snake, he diff'ront from a coral snake or a raddlesnake. Tha's how diff'ront Loomis-be from Ol' Hogsnout."

15.

One evening at dusk in 1935 Robbie Tilebin got off a bus in Regis. Everything he possessed was on his back and in his pockets; and this latter was little enough. He asked the Negro porter at the bus

depot how he could find his way to Buckeytown and was told which local bus would take him there, but by now he was penniless and asked "walking directions." When he got them, he started out briskly and reached the community at a little past nine o'clock. He asked a man how he could get to Mordecai Buckey's house, and the man, after staring at the stranger and his citified clothes and manner, pointed out the way.

"Where you from, boy?" the man asked with justified curiosity.

"I'm from a long way off, sir," said Robbie. "Chicago."

The man stared in amazement. "Chi—Chicago! Man!"

Robbie located the large, sprawling house and knocked on the door. The woman who answered stared at him blankly and asked, "Wha' you want here, boy?"

"I came to see Mr. Mordecai Buckey, ma'am," he replied politely.

"Mist'—ma'am— Who you anyways, boy?"

"I come from Chicago. I just got off the bus in Regis tonight. A man told me how to get here."

"Chicago! You come in heah, boy. You hongry?"

Robbie smiled. "I guess I could eat something, thank you, ma'am."

"My, *my!*" The woman muttered, smiling with pleasure at the extreme politeness of the young man. "You come in. Mordecai, he still up, I guess."

Mordecai, his tremendous bulk wrapped in a white robe, came out from his bedroom, as hale and hearty in his sixties as he had been twenty years earlier.

"What's your name, you boy from Chicago?" he asked.

"My name is Robbie Tilebin, sir. I'm your grandson. Mama told me to come to you someday. Home."

"All the way from Chicago, she send you? Somethin' wrong with Sophrony?"

"She's dead, Grandfather. She died almost a year ago. She told me that if I ever needed anything, or a friend, to come back here to you."

Mordecai said softly, "Sho now. I'm right sorrowed to heah that. She was right, your ma, an' I'm glad you come home. A fine gal, Sophrony was. An' yo' daddy? Wheah he at?"

"I don't know, sir. After my mama died he took all the money and lit out and I never saw him again."

"How old you now, Robbie?"

"I'm twenty-one, sir."

Mordecai studied his grandson. "You in some kind a trouble, boy, you come to me like your ma said?" the old man asked kindly.

"No, sir. With my mother and father, it wasn't so bad being in

Chicago. Alone, all by myself, I—it wasn't any good. I heard so much about Regis and Buckeytown, I got—homesick, I guess. I come home."

"An' you think it be better heah in Regis, Robbie?" Mordecai asked.

"It couldn't be worse."

Mordecai sighed with a smile. "You done right, son. You home now. Sophrony, she was a good gal an' her ma an' me, we loved her a lot. Her son, he's welcome here."

Robbie Tilebin's total absorption in the Buckey household was effected within a matter of a few days and he became "brother" to some twelve or fourteen children who ranged in age from one to eighteen, taking his place as the eldest, the most knowledgeable from the point of "school learnin'," and the most respected for his worldliness, since he was the only one who had traveled any kind of a respectable distance from Regis. Buckeytown welcomed him as Mordecai's own, and within a very short time he had overcome the distaste he had felt when forced to ride in the back of the bus after he crossed into Southern territory. Although he had been generally aware of segregation, he had not thought it would be so clearly defined as it was.

This, however, was soon forgotten in Buckeytown and now he knew his first real happiness and freedom. He avoided white Regis, learned to drive a car, later a truck. After a few months at home Robbie was indoctrinated into the mysteries of the big still operation by Mordecai, taken through every step slowly, even to being taught to navigate a pirogue to the interior and back. At night Mordecai watched as Robbie would draw a map of the best and most direct route to the still, which branches to avoid, afterward destroying the maps, making sure Robbie would not forget and become lost in the jungle.

Eventually Robbie took his place in the Swamp, learning one operation after another; and when eight months of this labor had passed, he confessed to Mordecai that he was unhappy and did not enjoy the work, linking it in his mind with the gangster-ridden metropolis from which he had escaped. Apologetically, he asked Mordecai for relief and old Mordecai only smiled and said, "Shuh! This ain't Chicago, boy, but if you don't like the work, we get you some-thin' else to do. What'd you like?"

"I'd like to get a job somewhere so I could earn a regular living and one day get married and have a house of my own right here in Buckeytown."

"You a pretty good hand with tools, Robbie. You like a job workin' with those tools?"

"Yes, sir. I'd like that."

"All right, son. I'll look around some for you." He threw a smile at Robbie. "You maybe got you a gal in mind to marry with?"

"I think so, Grandpa."

"Who?"

"Lida-Mae Lukens."

"That there light-skinned gal of Toby Lukens?"

"That's the one. She's about eighteen now. Maybe next year we could—"

"Sho. By next year that gal'll be more'n ripe for you."

It was a week later that Robbie Tilebin found himself working as an all-around handyman at Radford Hall.

Chapter 5

1.

By mid-December of 1940 Garrett Harwick had finished his working draft of "Cause Without Hope" and began working on the polished, or final, version. As he worked along, he sent carboned portions to Creighton Lewis in New York to feed to Maury Wilkerson. By the time the final draft would be completed, and he thought that this might be early or midsummer of 1941, he planned to go to New York himself to deliver the balance of the manuscript to Wilkerson.

He caressed the 936 pages of typewritten material lovingly. Two years of research and eighteen months of writing had brought him this far. The final draft was moving along more swiftly than he had expected, for most of the work was already in the typed working draft, with penciled corrections and marginal notations. Three and a half years were what he was holding in his hands: three and one-half years of a labor of love. Within a short time Christmas holidays would begin, and he planned to work steadily through each day and night of it to get the final draft rolling well along the road to his midsummer delivery deadline.

Ross Markland and Dave Pringle burst in on him one night with an invitation to go off with them on a marlin fishing jaunt to Florida and Bimini. "Boy," Ross insisted, "you've been working too hard and you can't keep a thing like that up forever. You need a trip like this one. When you come back you'll be fresher than the freshmen you teach. Your book will do much better for your getting away from it for a while, too. How about it, Gar?"

Garrett was adamant. "I appreciate this more than I can tell you, fellows, and believe me, nothing would please me more, but if I can get a good start on 'Cause' and can finish it by the time school closes in June, I'll be a free man for the summer months. Then, if some publisher buys it—"

"—and if it sells a jillion copies *and* it becomes a book club selec-

tion, *and* Broadway wants it for a play *and* Hollywood buys it for a movie *and*—what else can happen to a book, Gar?" Dave interjected with a laugh.

Gar laughed with them. "Nope," he said, "I can't hope for all that. Only for some publisher to bring it out. Once that happens, I promise you both I'll take a vacation. Then I'll come back and get to work on my next one. If 'Cause' does catch fire and takes off, no more teaching. Only writing."

"And maybe—uh—marrying?" Ross added.

"By that time you and Della will probably have five children," Garrett said.

"I hope you're right. Maybe I ought to get you to talk to Dell about that for me. I can't seem to nail her down to a decision."

"Don't let it worry you, Ross," Dave put in. "Pretty soon, with all this war talk, we'll probably all be crawling into uniforms and that'll do it, for sure."

Ross and Dave left early the following morning, Chuck Borden filling in the vacancy created by Garrett's determination to remain behind and get on with his work.

Three days later Garrett suffered an attack symptomatic of a contrary appendix that, in the opinion of Dr. Corwin, should have been removed a long time before. Garrett admitted it wasn't his first attack, but the others had been less severe, and was now resigned to give in to it. After a restless and uncomfortable night at the hospital he was operated on the following morning. When he awoke next, he was back in his own room, and when his sight grew clearer, he could see, in the dimness of the one small light that was turned on, Bethann sitting in the armchair next to his bed.

"Hey," he whispered.

She went to his side, taking his hand into hers. "How do you feel, Gar?" she asked softly.

For a few moments he lay without responding and she thought he hadn't heard her. Then he said in a low voice, "Like a matador who got mighty careless in a *corrida* and lost the decision to the bull."

"You can't feel too badly if you can joke about it," Bethann said with a smile, tightening her grip on his hand. His head turned back to her and his eyes opened a little wider in an effort to see her face. He said something she could not hear and she bent over closer to him. "I didn't hear you, Gar. What did you say?"

His eyes were closed again, his voice trailing off into sleep, but this time she heard him saying, "You're so beautiful, Bethann, and

I love you so very, very much. You ought to be the first vision a man sees when he wakes up every morning and the last he sees each night. Then everything would be—would be—”

She flushed with a sudden rush of love for him. She knew, and had known since she had first met him at the state university, that she had been the aggressor in the love that had come to both of them. His reserve stemmed from his knowledge—from Ross Markland—that she was the daughter of an extremely wealthy and powerful man in the state, and although she had spoken lightly of his attitude, he had remained obdurate. “When I’m in a better financial position, it will be different,” he told her.

“If I’m going to have to wait until you can match my father’s wealth, Gar, we’ll be too old to check your bank statement,” she had replied jokingly.

“You know what I mean, Bethann. If I could finish my book—” He laughed and said, “I know it won’t bring me riches, but the least I am hoping for is that I’ll know my work is acceptable and I can continue with my writing. If I can make it to that level, great. In the meantime I’ve no right to take up your time. This idea of mine that I can write may come to nothing and then I’ll have to start all over again in some other direction.”

Bethann had long ago resolved to play it his way and made no special effort to see him on days other than those she normally worked at the hospital. The day after he had been operated on was one of her regular days and she made the rounds with her book cart and looked in on him, only to find that he was asleep. Before she left for the day, she stopped by his room, but the nurse was helping him with his supper tray and they had only a few words together in her presence.

He did not lack company. There was a daily procession of students and teachers from the high school. After four days passed, the routine became more normal. Visitors fell off, busy at home with preparations for the coming Christmas holiday. Between visits from Bethann, he was becoming completely bored, angry that he must remain confined here for at least another week, that he could not be working on his book. He badgered and argued with the nurses and aides, tormenting them with his completely unreasonable criticisms of hospital methods, doctors, and the manner in which medicine was practiced.

The head nurse, a portly woman with a small sense of humor, took him seriously and complained to Dr. Corwin, who made Garrett promise to behave and allow the hospital to function along its own lines and with its own rules and regulations. And so, having calcu-

lated the tremendous odds against him, and in order to fight boredom in another way, he began to entertain the floor staff with witty prose and lyrical poetry, even as they performed the most intimate tasks for, on, and about him. He manufactured couplets and quatrains about them and the nobility of their profession, penned outrageous metrical compositions that linked the short, rotund head nurse with the tall, lanky chief surgeon, all of which provided much secret (and not-so secret) laughter for the nursing staff, aides, and orderlies. He flirted with and professed his undying love for every nurse who tended him, regardless of age.

None of this surprised Bethann when the rumors of Garrett's antics reached the first floor, and she was pleased that for the first time he was showing others a side of himself she had known existed back in Chancellor, when she was a freshman and he was completing his postgraduate work.

Christmas came and she brought him a gift and spent a good part of the afternoon with him, returning at night after Marcus had gone off to make a few personal calls that would probably finish up in a poker game with his cronies at the Regis Hotel. The hospital was quiet and cloaked with a solemnity she hadn't felt before. They talked quietly and finally it grew late and she kissed him and left.

Two days later she wheeled her library cart along the hall and stopped it just outside Garrett's door. She went in, saw his back turned toward her, and hesitated to speak lest he be asleep. On his bedside table lay a tablet of lined paper, words penciled upon it. She twisted it around and began to read to herself.

OWED TO A HOSPITAL STAFF
by an Inmate

A hospital isn't so dreadful
And wouldn't be awful to take
If there wasn't a scheme
By the whole nursing team
To check every "movement" I make.

It's rough on a man's finer senses
And cuts horribly into his "take"
To prey on some cutie
While nursing on duty
Who records every "movement" I make.

So I'm glad I'm returning to normal
And leaving behind in my wake
You nurses of beauty

Devoted to duty
Who know every "movement" I make.

Bethann had finished reading it and was giggling quietly to herself as she put the pad back in its proper place on the table. Suddenly, and without turning around to face his visitor, Garrett's sleepy voice spoke. "Go away," he said. "Miss McCall was here a little while ago and took it."

"Took what?" Bethann whispered in a disguised tone.

"My temperature. What else have I got left to contribute to this sterile laboratory of science? I've been drained of all my blood, stuck with a million needles, hacked upon, sewn up, poked, jabbed, probed, robbed of heartbeats and pulsebeats by everybody who swings a stethoscope or has fingers, until all I've got left is my poor, sad temperature that somebody is forever and ever taking from me."

"Temper is what you have, Mr. Harwick," Bethann said with mock severity, "not temperature. You've got a disposition like a cotton-mouth whose feeding has been interrupted. Why I love you at all is more than I can understand."

He turned in bed, tried to lift himself into a sitting position, and winced painfully. She went to him and put an arm about his shoulders to bolster him and he lay back looking up into her face, making no move to sit up. "That won't do it. You'll have to put your other arm around me."

She did so slowly, leaning over him with her face only inches from his own. He reached up and kissed her easily. "Thank you, Bethann," he said.

"For what?"

"For everything. For what you've been to me, what you are to me, for being here, for—well, just for *being*. I owe you so much—"

She smiled brightly and said, "At worst, there's still the rest of your life in which you can make it up to me."

He shook his head glumly. "That won't be enough time. Not even if it were doubled or tripled."

2.

When he was able to leave the hospital, he refused her offer to send a nurse to "do" for him. "They're nuisances to people who aren't really sick or in pain," he argued, "mechanical women with mechanical hands and hearts and minds and methods. Hell, she'd be getting me up at six every morning the way they do here, and just why, I'll never know.

"'Six o'clock,'" he mimicked in a higher-pitched tone, "'up-se-

daisy, up we come. Now let's have a real nice wash, brush our teeth, make our bed, and have a good rub for our back.' As though we were Siamese twins. Then wait for a cold, inedible breakfast with the most horrible coffee man ever created. And I emphasize *man* because so perfect a Creator as God couldn't possibly have contrived anything so thoroughly miserable as hospital coffee, not even for the worst sinners on earth."

Bethann laughed at his tirade, and knowing she was amused, Garrett went on and on. Yet he could not dissuade her from driving him home to his cottage, bringing Newton along to help him down the path and into his bed, to see that he had sufficient food in the kitchen and icebox, to bring in a huge stack of cut firewood so that he would have it easily at hand until he could replenish it himself without difficulty.

Almost every day, at one time or another, Bethann would stop by to see her charge, recognizing in him a man who might easily skip a meal, go unwashed or unshaven, sleep in an unmade, rumpled bed, and not think there was anything wrong as long as no one else suffered by it.

Calmly, and over his protests, she brought new fresh foods and canned goods and whole bean coffee (for he must grind each potful fresh), ignoring his good-natured growlings that he was being kept. And in moments that were quiet and warm and tender, he would select a volume from the several hundred that stood in the shelves he had nailed together in the front room, and together they would read the works of poets and writers for whom his admiration and love were deep. Here he taught her an appreciation for the works he had read and re-read, the writings of those she had always regarded as being "way over my small, unappreciative brain"; to understand the feeling and true meaning behind the words and between the lines, the love and life that had been poured into their manuscripts that were printed between these covers, so worn by repeated use. And when she was not here with him, she would peruse a slim volume of poetry or philosophy he had suggested to her; and then it came to her that it was not what he had taught her that she loved so much as it was his way of letting others speak the love he felt for her, being unable—or unwilling—at this time to speak the words as his very own. So she read the words and saw in them his face and heard his voice, followed his invisible finger as it pointed out certain underscored lines and passages, interpreting their meanings for herself.

It would be at least two weeks before he would be permitted to

return to his teaching job at Regis High. Ross, Dave, and Chuck had returned from their holiday trip luckless in their search for record-sized marlin, but highly browned by the sun, making Garrett seem all the more pale by contrast. They had come in the early afternoon and stayed until dusk, listening first to his tale of misfortune, then taking turns telling him of their high adventures among the Florida keys and the gaiety of Bimini at holiday time. Bethann arrived shortly after they left. She could see he was tired and urged him to take a nap while she read, put the place in order, and, seeing he was fast asleep, prepared supper for them.

They had eaten lightly and she washed the dishes while he worked over his manuscript. Unwilling to disturb him, she went into the bedroom and lay down to listen to the battery-powered radio, hearing the furious clicking of the typewriter keys, happy that the work was going so well. At nine o'clock he became tired and was suddenly aware that Bethann was not in the room. He got up and went seeking her, found her in the dark with only the tiny yellow band of light that lighted up the numbers of the radio dial to make them visible. She heard him turn toward the dresser and strike a match with which to light the oil lamp that stood upon it and said, "Don't light it, Gar. Come here beside me."

She raised the coverlet from herself and he kicked off the bedroom slippers that had been one of her gifts to him. He lay down beside her, aware now that she was wearing only the briefest of undergarments, her dress and slip draped over the chair by the window. Momentarily, he was startled, shy, almost frightened; and then he lay back with a deep sigh, his arms wrapped around her tightly, feeling her lips upon his own.

"Don't say anything, Gar," she whispered. "I know that if I don't make the first move, you won't, and I don't know any other way left for me to convince you that I love you as much as I know you love me. I need you, Gar. I know you need me. And I want you to marry me."

"Oh, Bethann," he said softly, "darling, darling Bethann. You've robbed me of the words that have belonged to me for so long, waiting for the right moment to use them. You know even better than I how much I love you, don't you? But I can't marry you until I can feel I'm free to do it—on the day when my book is accepted and I can look into Mr. Marcus Audrey Radford's eyes and feel I've got every right to say, 'I want to marry your lovely, precious daughter. I can support her and take care of her every need without any help from you.'"

Bethann said, "I can't wait that long, Gar, even if it were to come next week. It's been too long already. When the time comes, we'll go to him together and tell him. But in the meantime—"

His hands caressed her with an easy, delicate grace she had known would be characteristic of him. There was no immature, impatient grabbing or clutching; only the tenderness and gentleness with which one would examine a priceless work of art. He got out of bed and undressed while she slipped out of the remaining wisp of undergarment she wore. His lips nuzzled her neck, reaching for her lips, and when she felt the warmth of his naked flesh against her own, the first eager tenseness went out of her. Her eyes closed and she relaxed completely within his firm grasp.

She lay as if suspended in a dream, one that was only beginning and promised so very much, feeling his hands course lightly over her breasts. She began to respond to his touch, her own hands caressing his back, feeling the tense muscle there, the strain in his legs and arms. Their movements joined as she maneuvered herself into position to receive him, to become an actual physical part of this man whom she loved.

The tenseness was back in both of them as their movements increased and then he was guiding himself toward her and she felt the hot thrust of him inside her. She clutched at him with a new and more frantic grasp with that first wave of searing pain, her nails digging into his flesh, raking him, waiting for the first shock to subside, to return her to the first wonderful dream of pure, physical bliss. The pain receded and she lay wondering if this brutal animal collision between them was all they had been leading up to, this humiliation of having stripped herself naked for him, to have him cover her body with his own, to permit him to invade her flesh in this hurtful way. She had been hurled back into reality, the knowledge coming with the pain that she had taken a step in a direction from which she could never return; that she had been the eager and willing aggressor in this brutish act in her unmasked desire to have this man use her in this manner.

And then she was conscious that his movement had begun again, gently, so gently, and hardly aware that she was doing so, she was moving in concert with him. She was breathless with the new feeling of the act, the need to outdo him in ferocity. Her hands moved upward, locking together behind his neck, drawing his lips down upon her, now struggling all the more to make herself easily accessible to him. Suddenly there was a newer, greater urgency that began to drive her to twist and turn with exquisite desire, knowing

somehow that it would soon be over and not wanting it to end; and she could hear herself unaccountably and unashamedly gasping a single word aloud, repeating it: "More. More. *More!*" saying it over and over again with the rhythm and movement of her body. She heard Garrett's gasping response, felt the quickening of his movements to match her own.

And then it was as nothing she had ever felt or known or heard or read or dreamed about. She cried out again and felt his open mouth upon hers, moving back and forth across it. She tried to bring her knees up to give more of herself to him, but then she went slack and her eyes closed and now her aching arms dropped away to her sides and she lay still, feeling him move slowly, slowly, slowly over her; and now he, too, had stopped all movement and they lay spent and gasping, locked together. She moved to one side, he at once following so that they could lie side by side, holding each other, still joined together.

"You're wonderful," he whispered. "So wonderful."

"Oh, Gar, I didn't know it could be anything like this. I didn't. How can anyone possibly know the first time?"

"I'm so glad. Once or twice I was beginning to have some doubts."

"More than you'll ever know," Bethann said, then fell into a silence. After a while she said, "I'm so glad my first time was with you, Gar."

"I'm glad, too, darling. I'll never as long as I live want another woman, not as long as I have you."

"You'd *better* not!" she exclaimed possessively.

Afterward, they spoke of love more frankly and honestly and openly between them. His words would come tumbling out like water that had been suddenly released from behind the walls of a dam, pouring down the spillway in torrents. All through that winter they met at his cottage, both knowing how deeply and irrevocably in love they were with each other. And as it must inevitably, the question of marriage would arise, coming generally from Garrett who now felt the guilt even more than Bethann. He spoke of it in terms of "*after 'Cause Without Hope' is accepted*," and she would laugh and say, "I'm glad we're both young and that I'm a woman of patience. And someday I hope I'll even be able to overcome your unreasonable prejudices and intolerances toward money."

And Garrett would laugh in return and reply, "I haven't even the slightest prejudice or intolerance toward money, darling, as long as it's our own."

Once she asked him suddenly, "How do you feel?" referring to his physical being.

They were lying on the bed together at the time, he watching her face as she spoke; and now he said softly, "I feel very sorry."

Puzzled, she parroted the last word. "Sorry?"

He nodded solemnly. "Sorry for every man who has ever seen and hungered for you, every unfortunate being who has ever dreamed of holding you in his arms as I am this moment—" he kissed her hard and felt the responsiveness in her— "who can't touch or kiss you as I did just now.

"Such compassion—" Bethann began, but he stopped her, saying, "Not so, darling, not so. Compassion denotes sympathy in varying degrees. What I feel for them is pure, raw, unadulterated pity." A moment later he said, "You know I love you very much, don't you, Bethann?"

"I think I do, Gar," she replied.

He gripped her arms tightly. "You *know* I do, don't you?"

"I know, Gar. I know," Bethann whispered tenderly.

Chapter 6

1. November, 1941

By early afternoon a few soft cloud shadows drifted slowly over the Square, light puffs of white that held little or no promise of more rain. Bethann Radford drove her small yellow convertible into the white-striped macadam parking lot behind her father's bank, and as she did, the smiling young Negro attendant let down the chain between two steel posts where the word "Private" was lettered in black against the white of the painted brick wall. There were six such private spaces: one for her father; one for Cass Worden, his vice president and general manager; one each for Cabell Langley, secretary, Miss Caroline Abelard, Worden's assistant and said to be one of the quickest, most astute banking minds in the state, and Jim Tregor, treasurer and head cashier. The rest of the large lot was for the other employees and customers of the bank.

"Aft'noon, Miss Radford," the attendant greeted as he lowered the chain for her.

"Hello, Ben," she replied. "Is my father in?"

Ben jerked his head toward Marcus's blue sedan. "His car still here, Miss Radford. Less'n he step out by the front way."

She got out of the car and Ben started toward the rear entrance to the bank to hold the door open for her. "Never mind now, Ben," she said. "I want to go across the Square and do some shopping first."

She walked along the narrow pavement next to the building until she reached the cemented walkway between the bank and the new *Herald* building and emerged into the floral beauty of the Square. She window-shopped past Meacham's Ladies' Fashions, Myra Cornell's Teen-Age Heaven, Diana Davis's Fun and Party Shop, Siegel's Men's Shop, Haverstraw's Barber Shop. She went into Markland's Bazaar and ordered several decks of plastic playing cards she had promised to the patients in one of the hospital wards, found that her personalized Christmas cards were ready, waited until they were

wrapped for her, then had a sandwich at the soda fountain, where Ross Markland found her.

"Hi, beautiful," he greeted.

"Hello, Ross. You're just in time to pick up my lunch check. I'm on my way to the bank to cash a check."

He already had taken the slip, signed his name to it. "My pleasure," he said. "What else can I do to make you happy?"

"You might stop keeping Della all to yourself and begin sharing her with her old friends," Bethann said, then saw the small flicker of pain cross his face and regretted her words. She knew that Ross was having his personal difficulties with Della Borden, she with her mind set on Braden Etheridge, who was just beginning to practice law with Will Campbell's firm and, like Garrett, wanted to get his feet set a little more solidly in his work before he would talk seriously to Della. Bethann hoped it would work out for Ross, whom she had known for many years and who, when she first appeared in Chancellor as a freshman, had guided her over the early hurdles he took so easily. Della had seemed to like Ross, but with Braden's presence while Ross was away at college, he had lost much ground with her.

Ross changed the subject and they chatted over a cigarette. Then a bell tolled softly and Ross got up, saying, "That's my signal," and said good-by to her. The sun was high and the day growing warmer, unseasonably so, when she came out of the store and crossed from the southwest side of the Square to the northeast side where the bank stood. As she passed along the bench-lined walk, some of the old men looked up at the youthful figure that walked briskly by. They all knew Marcus Radford's daughter, and as one called out a cracked, "Evenin', Miss Bethann," she replied cheerily with a "Good evening, Mr. Cadden"; and then other heads lifted along the line, saw her, and called out their individual greetings as she passed each man; it was almost as though she were calling the roll of those present, "Mr. Lenhart," "Mr. Crouse," "Mr. Denby," to the benchwarmers. She knew most of them by name, men she remembered from their in-patient days at County General, men who could not read the books she brought to their bedsides, but who welcomed her presence and engaged her in conversation as a means to kill time between meals and medications and sleep.

She stepped out of the Square across the street and onto the pavement that took her past the new Chilton Building where the new chain store from the Midwest would occupy the entire first floor. She saw Gordon Thomas, owner and publisher of the *Herald*,

in conversation with a man who was evidently the store representative, no doubt readying an announcing advertisement as they watched the huge neon sign being hoisted above the marquee by a crane to where four men waited to anchor it into its final resting place.

Gordon Thomas called a friendly greeting to her and she replied with a smile. She came upon the near-white granite-faced County Building and looked up into its open doorway. Standing to one side of the modern, glass-sheeted front, HESSIE LOOMIS, Sheriff Willis Bartly's chief deputy, lounged in an easy slouch. HESSIE watched BETHANN's approach with a physical pleasure, followed the graceful, natural swing of her body as she returned Gordon Thomas's greeting, enjoying the thoughts that the sight of her provoked in him, so in harmony with the freshness of the day, the beauty that surrounded the Square. As she passed by and looked casually in his direction, he grinned crookedly and raised one finger to the rolled brim of his hat in an appreciative salute of recognition. BETHANN nodded shortly without smiling and turned away, feeling a cold revulsion similar to that she would have felt if she had come suddenly upon a snake in the woods. And as she passed, Loomis continued to stare after her, having noted the tightening grimace on her face; and his grin faded behind other thoughts that leaped vengefully into his mind as he watched the movement of her trimly rounded buttocks, eyes drilling through her clothes, measuring her in his mind with exact and precise detail.

As she passed beyond his view, he sighed slowly and went inside the building.

2.

BETHANN turned into the doorway of the bank and the smiling janitor paused in his labor of polishing the wide brass pushbar to pull the door open for her. Inside, she cashed a check for one hundred dollars. Miss Tula Carston counted out the four twenties, one ten, one five, and five ones, the way BETHANN always took it, and pushed them across the glass plate to her. She folded the bills into her purse and started toward the back of the large, high-ceilinged room to her father's office.

"You forgot your signature on the check, Miss BETHANN," she heard Tula's voice race after her and turned back apologetically to take the extended pen from the bulky teller and sign her name, remembering the sharp-tongued woman who, in her own way, was an indomitable, steel-spined spirit and somewhat of a local character.

Once, during the depression days of the early thirties, a man had brushed past the small line standing before her cage, handed her a paper sack, flourished a small, nickel-plated revolver, and demanded all her cash. Tula, then in her twenties and desperately in need of her job, simply shoved the bag aside, ignored the gun, said in her shrill, loud voice, "You get to the end of the line and wait your turn, boy! You ain't no better'n anybody else in here!" With the attention of every customer and employee of the bank suddenly thrust upon him, including that of the stunned armed guard, the would-be holdup man stood frozen until the amazed guard disarmed and led him away.

Bethann signed the check and returned it to the smiling Miss Carston. She turned and started again for the back of the building, nodded a greeting to Jim Tregor, another to Caroline Abelard. She could see Cass Worden at his desk at the back of the enclosure and knew that he was readying some comment for her.

Suddenly she felt a wave of dizziness come over her and put her hand out to the nearest marble column to steady herself. Jim Peach, the bank guard, stood with his hands clasped behind his back, leaning against one of the two center islands where customers prepared their withdrawal and deposit slips. He had been watching her almost unconsciously, preparing to speak when she came past his station, and then he saw her pause at the column, reach out one hand to touch its marble facing, bring her other hand upward across her eyes. The next thing he saw was that her hand dropped away, she had closed her eyes, her forehead wrinkled into a deep frown. A package she was holding fell and then her purse followed, burst open as it made contact with the marble floor, and scattered its contents in all directions. Before she could fall to the floor herself, Peach was beside her, one arm around her back and the other under her knees, cupping her to his chest as he lifted her.

Others, customers and employees alike, became aware of what was happening and crowded around them. "Get back," Peach commanded in his military-tinged voice and pushed his way through them toward Marcus's private office, calling to Miss Marshall, "Get Doc Roland upstairs. Quick!"

Jim's and Marcus's superficial examination revealed that, beyond a total draining of color from her face, there were no outward signs of what might be wrong. Before Dr. Roland could reach the office, Betty Marshall and Caroline Abelard had applied wet handkerchiefs to her wrists and forehead and managed to bring her out of the spell.

"What—happened?" she asked, trying to rise from the sofa.

"You fainted, Bethann," Caroline said. "Don't try to get up yet. Dr. Roland is on his way."

Marcus sat on the sofa beside her and held her hand, anxiety etched elaborately upon his face, unable to speak. At that moment Dr. Roland came in, black bag in hand. Miss Marshall brought a glass of water, into which he poured a few drops of a liquid and forced Bethann to drink it. In a few moments her color had returned fully. The others had gone and Bethann got up, walked around the office for a few shaky steps, then smiled and said she was all right and could she drive home and forget the whole silly thing?

"Yes, if you promise to rest. You're probably overtired without realizing it, Bethann," Dr. Roland said. "And by the way, young lady, it's been well over a year since you've been in to see me for a checkup. I'd like to see you in my office sometime before the week is over. Just a wise precaution," he added with a thin smile.

Marcus's concern was not so easily allayed. "Rest a while, Bethann, and I'll drive you home," he said with some anxiety, but Bethann rejected his offer with a wave of her hand. "That's silly, Daddy. I'm perfectly fine now and I feel foolish enough as it is, starting all this commotion over nothing."

Marcus, nevertheless, saw her to her car, watched her drive off. When he returned to his office, Sam Roland had already left.

That night Sudie told Marcus he would be dining alone. "Miss Bethann, she have some soup and gone to bed. She feelin' a mite poorly."

Marcus rose, dropped his napkin on the table.

"No use you fussin' 'roun' her, Mist' Ma'cus. I done taken care ob her. She sleep now. Taken her a sleepin' pill."

Marcus sat down again. "Has she been feeling like this before, Sudie? She's never been sick like this before that I can remember."

"She be a'right, Mist' Ma'cus. Don' you worry about her. She be fine."

The following morning when he came down for breakfast, Newton served him. "Where's Miss Bethann?" Marcus asked.

"She ain' so spry this mo'nin'. Sudie upstairs taken breakfus to her."

Marcus went up to Bethann's room, knocked, and went inside. Sudie was on her knees mopping the floor with a towel, the breakfast tray untouched on the night table. "Where's Miss Bethann?" he asked brusquely.

Sudie's head bobbed in the direction of the bathroom. "She in

her bathroom. She got a upset stomach. Somethin' she et, I guess."

He went to the bathroom door and knocked. "Bethann?"

Her voice was surprisingly bright. "Daddy? I'm all right. It's nothing."

She came out, the edges of her hair wet, her face beaded with drops of water that had not yet been wiped with the towel she held. "Are you sure?" Marcus asked anxiously. "Suppose I call Sam Roland and ask him to drop by."

Her laugh was disarming. "That's nonsense, Daddy. I'm perfectly all right now. I've got to get dressed. I'm due at the hospital library at nine-thirty. And you'd better run along, too, or you'll be late."

He kissed her cool forehead and allowed her to walk him to the door. Sudie was still on her knees dabbing at the carpeting with the towel. "You'll be sure to see Dr. Roland as he suggested, won't you, Beth?"

"I will if it will make you feel better," Bethann replied.

Before he went to his own office, Marcus mounted the stairs to Dr. Roland's office, arriving there just behind the doctor.

"You look beat up, Sam," Marcus greeted, "like you needed to take some of your own advice."

Sam Roland's smile was bleak. He yawned and stretched before replying. "Up the first half of the night with an idiot who parlayed an alcohol and gasoline highball into an automobile accident. Spent the other half at the hospital with a stubborn infant who had sense enough not to want to come into this crazy world. I don't guess he'll thank me for it, but he's here. Just in time to see a war in the making."

"Staying out all night make you feel that morbid, Sam?"

"Hell, Marcus, it takes less than that. I came in to snatch a nap before visiting hours. What's on your busy mind this morning?"

"It's Bethann, Sam. I'm worried about her."

"Nothing to worry about, Marc. She's in good health."

"That fainting business yesterday. No dinner last night, and this morning an upset stomach. Threw up before she could make it to the bathroom."

Roland regarded Marcus with quiet seriousness. "So?"

"That's not natural, is it? She's never been like that before."

"To your knowledge, you mean."

"All right, to my knowledge."

Roland smiled. "Only thing worse than a fussy mother is a fussy father. I'll guarantee you one thing, Marc. It's not serious, whatever

it is. Send her in and I'll check her out. She's due for one anyway, but don't worry about her."

For the moment Marcus was satisfied

On the following day Bethann went to the bank building to Dr. Roland's offices. He asked her a few preliminary questions and she rose as if to leave, thinking that this was the extent of his professional interest. As she got up, he put out a hand and blocked her way. "Sit for a moment, Bethann," he said. "I'm more interested in what caused you to faint in that way. In a girl your age and general good health, there must be a reason for it."

"Oh, it was nothing, Dr. Roland," she replied easily, waving him off. "Probably, as you said the other day, I was overtired. Or it might have been something I'd eaten. I've had the same feeling before, but not as severe as this time." She laughed lightly. "It might even have been that my girdle was too tight."

He picked up the sheaf of cards, records of her visits to him, his visits to the Hall to see her ever since he had delivered her some twenty or twenty-one years earlier. "You haven't had a checkup in almost fourteen months. Now would be a good time for you to have one."

She protested mildly. "I've got so much shopping to do," she said. "Couldn't we make it another time?"

"The shopping can wait, dear," he said kindly. "The examination shouldn't." He pushed a button and his nurse appeared. "Go along with Miss Ringgold. Take everything off and wrap the sheet about you. And—" he smiled again—"don't forget to remove the tight girdle you're not wearing. I'll be there in a few moments."

While he waited for Miss Ringgold to return, he shuffled through the cards again, the dates flashing like lights to illuminate and refresh his memory of her years on earth.

The obstetric and pediatric stage.

Tonsils and adenoids.

Measles. Mumps. Chest cold.

There was a special card inserted here, related to the tragic circumstances of Martha-Louise's death.

Another, more severe, chest cold. Possible pneumonia.

Fractured carpus, second and third phalanges; resulting from a fall during a game (or having been pushed) at school.

Series of tetanus shots after stepping on a nail.

Bruised patella; a fall from her bicycle.

Head and chest colds; none serious.

Appendectomy.

1934. A notation that Marcus had sent her to him so he could explain certain biological processes that had begun to function, questions a mother might have answered when a daughter came home with the conglomeration of misinformation she had been picking up from playmates, questions for which Marcus could not adequately provide answers.

1938. A few weeks before her eighteenth birthday. Marcus had given Bethann her very own car, a too-expensive, too-powerful yellow roadster, a Shepheard, imported from England, Roland recalled. So now there was a record of her first automobile accident. A road call late one afternoon that sent him racing to the County General emergency room, with a deputy sheriff on a motorcycle to clear his way. Breathing with relief finally while Marcus paced like a caged, wild animal outside the door. To hell with him, Roland had said angrily to himself as he lighted and smoked a cigarette before going outside to tell him she would be all right. To hell with him for giving a girl her age a machine as powerful as all that. Well, it lay wrecked out on the road now, but it could easily have killed her. She had survived the fractured clavicle, separation of the scapula, two fractured ribs, bruised tibia, body bruises from mild to severe. His suspicions of a fractured pelvis had been unwarranted, fortunately. So, when he had taken his time and finished the cigarette, he had gone out into the waiting room and told Marcus. And the damned perversity of the man! he now recalled with a grim smile. Marcus was so grateful that Bethann was no worse hurt, he promised her he would order another Shepheard immediately!

Roland patted the cards back into form and put the large clip over them again. A lifetime in cards. How well he knew this body he was about to examine, unhappy with the diagnostician's keen insight, or medical intuition, call it what you would, that he would now find true what he had begun to suspect the day before.

Miss Ringgold tapped on the door. He went down the narrow hall past two small examination rooms, opened the door, and saw her lying on the leather-covered table, covered from throat to ankles in the white sheet. He said nothing to put her at ease, as he usually did with a patient before a vaginal examination. He went to the sink and scrubbed his hands with the soap and brush, then took the towel from the nurse.

"Would you mind calling the hospital and asking them for a report on Mrs. Crane, dear?" he said to Miss Ringgold in his soft voice.

"And while you're at it, check on Tom Benning. I want to know about the blood sugar test in particular."

Miss Ringgold said, "Yes, of course, Doctor," and went out. She knew that the expression "Would you mind calling the hospital and asking them—" was the signal to her that he wanted to be alone with the patient in whose presence the request was made; what he was really saying to her was, "Please leave me alone with this patient and return in about a half hour, unless I am finished sooner and ring for you."

When Miss Ringgold returned, Bethann was sitting up and the doctor was washing his hands. Before she could say anything about the errand on which he had sent her, Dr. Roland was saying, "Miss Ringgold will do the chest X-ray for you, dear. When you're dressed, I'll be in my office. Be sure to see me before you leave."

This time, when she sat in the chair across from his desk, there were no words between them for a full thirty seconds. For the first time in all his years in medicine, he found speech difficult. It was Bethann who finally broke the strained silence.

"I don't suppose there's any doubt in your mind, Dr. Roland?" she asked quietly.

So she knows without my telling her, he thought. He did not look at her as his hands dropped the cards he was shuffling, palms turned outward and upward. He shook his head. "None," he said.

There was another moment of silence and then she asked, "What are you going to do, Doctor?"

He swung around to face her, eyes still aimed down at his hands, fingertips compressed together hard, lips pursed slightly. "Nothing," he replied.

"You won't tell Father?"

"Not unless you want me to."

She felt the wave of deep relief sweep over her. "No. Oh, no. Of course not." Then, still unbelievably, "You won't tell him?"

"No. I said I wouldn't. How old are you now, dear? Exactly. Twenty or is it twenty-one?"

"I'll be twenty-one in June."

He nodded, looking away again. "Bethann, dear, I won't preach or advise. I leave that for others who are less anxious to keep your friendship. You are of legal age, presumed by law and man to be a sane and sober young woman in complete possession of her mental faculties, physically able to cohabit with any man of her choice or desire. What passes between you and me, as between patient and

doctor, is a secret that only you have the right to divulge, as long as it is not an emergency matter of life or death; and this is not such a matter in that particular sense. Now do you understand?"

She nodded, and as he glanced up, he could see that the eagerness written upon her face and in her eyes was not a look of embarrassment or shame; it was no different from that of the countless young women to whom he had imparted this same information, young married women who had been buoyantly happy with the news. There had been some who hadn't been so happy, who became angry and tearful; but Bethann was not one of these. He looked away again, remembering back to the night her mother had died from a clumsy abortion that had been performed upon her in a crude, backwoods manner. No, he decided, this came in an act of deep love. She wants to bear this child as much as any married woman should. He breathed a deep sigh of relief.

His voice was stronger now as he looked up again and said, "Would you want me to tell your father for you? Would it be easier for you that way?"

Bethann stood up and smiled and he was reassured again that it was a smile of happiness; and seeing it, he was forced to smile in return. "No. No, thank you, Dr. Roland," Bethann replied. "I appreciate your wanting to help. And thank you for being so kind. I'll tell Father myself."

"Be careful, dear. Your—your father—loves you very much. He will be hurt—and upset—very angry, I'm afraid. He—"

"Don't be afraid, Doctor. I know my father is capable of—I know he will be angry and hurt, but I think I know how to handle him. I'll wait for the right moment."

4.

Five minutes after Ben, the parking lot attendant, told Marcus Radford that Bethann had left, Marcus had Sam Roland's nurse on the phone. "He's with a patient, Mr. Radford, and there are four more waiting. Is it important or may I have him call you?"

"Ask the doctor to stop by to see me when he is free. Tell him it is important."

It was four o'clock before Dr. Roland, black bag in hand, was ushered in Marcus's office by Miss Marshall. "I'm due at the hospital, Marc," Roland announced with an air of impatience.

"You saw Bethann this morning." It was a statement rather than a question.

"I did and she is all right. I'll have to wait for the lab tests

on blood and urine, but I'm satisfied that she is in good health."

"Then what caused her to faint? And throw up?"

Roland shrugged evasively. "It could have been almost anything. Something she'd had to eat, the heat—"

"It wasn't that hot, Sam," Marcus snapped, "and she'd have been a lot sicker if it had been food."

"I bow in deference to your superior medical knowledge. May I be excused now, Doctor?" Roland said with heavy sarcasm.

"You're dodging me, Sam. I can tell when a man starts talking in circles."

"Marc, don't try your political psychology on me. I'm too old not to be able to recognize your tactics."

"Goddamn it, Sam, all I want is a simple, honest answer. What is it with Bethann?"

"I've told you, Marc, Bethann's health is not in any danger."

Marcus stared angrily at the doctor, knowing he would get nowhere by pursuing the subject. He swiveled his chair away from Roland, then heard the door click shut, turned back to stare vacantly at the spot where the man had stood only moments before.

That night Marcus sat alone in his study in the chair beside the fireplace, the Chancellor *Examiner* on his lap unread, deep in thought. There had been little conversation at dinner between himself and Bethann, but he was aware that she had little more than tasted her food. Neither Sam Roland's nor Bethann's reassurances had quenched the gnawing, nagging thought that burned in his mind. He heard the door open, looked up and saw Bethann, dressed as she had been at dinner.

"I think I'll go out for a breath of fresh air, Daddy," she said casually. "I won't be late."

"Come in for a minute, Bethann," Marcus replied. She came into the room, closed the door, and sat in the companion chair that faced him.

"What did Dr. Roland have to say about your examination?" Marcus asked.

"Not much," she brushed the question aside lightly. "Everything was all right. I told you there's nothing to be worried about."

His expression did not change, showed no relief in her words. "Really, Daddy—" she began, but his stern statement incised her reply sharply.

"You're pregnant, aren't you?"

One of the burning logs crackled, broke, and fell apart with a

shower of sparks against the brass chain curtain to break the poignant silence between them. Bethann's face flamed red. Her mouth opened, then closed tightly into a thin line.

"Well?" The word cut across the short distance that separated them with an electric force.

"All right, Daddy," she said quietly. "I'm pregnant."

Another moment of anguished silence passed; then Marcus, trying mightily to control his voice, said, "Who is he, Bethann?"

"Father—" she dropped the more intimate "Daddy" now—"please don't ask me his name at this moment. I know you are angry and hurt, but I don't want to name him now."

"Or later?"

"Please, Father. He doesn't even know. I'm on my way to tell him now. Only Dr. Roland, you, and I know I'm pregnant. Dr. Roland doesn't know who he is, either. Please let me go and tell him. When I do, he'll be furious that I didn't tell him sooner, so that we could have been married at once. But I couldn't tell him. I didn't know for sure until today."

"Who is he?" Marcus demanded again.

"Father," she pleaded, "I know what you must feel, but I swear it isn't the way you think. It isn't one of those sordid, dirty things. We love each other very much." She felt the heat in her father's bright, piercing stare. "He is a wonderful person, a cultured man with all the finer social graces and sensibilities you could ever hope for in a son-in-law. Please. I tell you it is only because of your wealth and position that he hasn't forced a marriage sooner; but when I tell him, when he knows—about this—I know he will insist that we get married at once. We'll go away quietly and within a week—"

"With a man I don't know? Or do I know him?" Suddenly, with a near hopeful ring in his voice, "Is it Ross Markland?"

"No, it isn't Ross. If it were, we would have been married first. But with—there's a good reason—"

Bitterly, Marcus exploded, "Good reason! Oh, Bethann!" His suffering was monumental now and he rose from his chair and paced the study, punching a fist into his open hand repeatedly, alternating the blows from left to right hand. "*A good reason!*" he repeated.

He stopped pacing, stood before her, and said, "All *right!* Go to him and tell him. Then come back and let me know what your honorable gentleman has said. Now go along upstairs and change into something warmer before you go out. I don't want you catching pneumonia in your—present condition. I'll be waiting for you to come back."

She jumped up happily, to embrace and kiss him, then stepped back, interpreting the look on his face for one of revulsion. "Thank you, Father," she said quietly, turned, and walked quickly to the door. When it closed on her, Marcus went to his desk and dialed a number, heard it buzz several times before a voice answered.

"Will," Marcus said, "I need something done very quickly. My Bethann is going to be leaving here in about thirty or forty minutes. She's upstairs now bathing and dressing. When she goes out I want her followed. I want to know where she goes, whom she sees, how long she stays, and if she comes directly home. I want you to follow her in one of your unmarked cars so she won't be able to recognize you. I don't want her intercepted in any case. Only observed."

"I'll take care of it right away, Marcus," Will Bartly replied. "I'll put Loomis on it."

"No. Not Loomis or anybody else. I want you to do it yourself."

"Marcus," Bartly pleaded, "this ain't my kind of thing. You know that. I got to try keepin' up with your Bethann, she'd know it in no time at all. Besides, I can trust Hessie. One thing I know for sure—he won't talk."

There was a moment of silent desperation for both men and then Marcus said, "Will, you just remember one thing in case anything goes wrong. I've got my hands tight on your throat."

Bartly replied, "You got nothing to worry about, Marcus. I got mine around Loomis's. He's one pup I got a tight leash on. I'm tellin' you, don't worry. It'll get done and done right, I promise you."

"All right, Will. You just remember what I told you."

Bethann's yellow convertible flashed out of Radford Hall, turned west toward the river. Bathed, dressed warmly against the chilly night air of early December, she felt a sense of intense relief that the most difficult part of it was now behind her, knowing that Marcus, once he met Garrett and came to know him, would be as happy for her as she would be for herself. The bright night was made even more glorious with the knowledge that they would be married so soon; that a whole, brand-new and wonderful life lay ahead of them. Years of it. Oh, the hundred-and-one plans she had made since he had come to Regis to teach. No big ones. Nothing monumental or earth-shaking. Just the little, so-important ones. How she would rearrange her large room. Put a false wall into which wide closets would be built for their clothes. . . .

"Poor, poor Garrett," she thought with an inner smile, "from to-

night on, you won't have a chance." Garrett, with his drab little cottage, his few worn suits and other things he never found time to take care of, nor add to. The clothes she would buy for him; that is, after he got used to the idea that money was for spending, regardless of whether it was hers or his. Or even Marcus's. Plans. The car she would buy for him to replace his worn-out Ford with over 100,000 miles he liked to boast so much about. Shoes. Sports clothes. A long honeymoon trip during his summer vacation. They had discussed this even, but not in relation to themselves. Just as people. People who traveled to Europe only for the sake of going and returning, to be able to say with smug superiority, "Europe? Oh, I've been."

"If this foolishness over there ever lets up and someone does something about that mad dog, Hitler, and his stooge, Mussolini. I'd like to get to Europe before they destroy it," Garrett had said. "Not to go slam-banging through London, then Paris, the Rivas, Rome, Florence, Geneva, one after the other until you get to feel as though you've been through a traveling kaleidoscope. It should be planned. Spend a month or two or whatever time you've got in one place at a time. Learn something about it, the people, the language you've been studying for a few months before you even begin the trip. Even in so short a time, to become a part of it, live it as the natives of that country do. Then to come home and relive it over and over again in your own heart and mind and know there is a small corner of the world other than the one in which you live, one that you have really *understood*. And someday, when you return, get the same wonderful feeling of running into an old, good friend in a strange, faraway place; maybe to stay and write a book there."

And she had responded eagerly, "That's the way we'll go, Gar. Every summer during your holiday we'll do just that: pick another place on the map and spend the entire summer there. Maybe someday you'll take a sabbatical and we'll spend it abroad in perhaps two or three countries, a few months at a time, to give you enough time to write and collect material."

He had looked at her lovingly. "You know, Bethann," he said, "if you weren't so damn well heeled, we'd make one hell of a couple."

"Even *with* money. It's almost as practical as not having any at all," she had jibed at him. "If I could only in some way cure you of being such a snob about money—"

Now it would be different. So happily, wonderfully different!

The wind whipping around the short, warm jacket, sweated body, light tan pigskin gloves over her hands. Everything fell into place as she swept down the road in the topless car, almost singing

her happiness aloud with eager anticipation of seeing Garrett, watching for his elation at her wonderful—and, she was certain, startling—news. She hadn't seen him since before her visit to Dr. Roland, a matter of three long days.

She fairly flew along County Road, picking up the bypass, the one called Upper River Road, racing along past the last turnoff into Buckeytown, coming quickly upon the small set of worn tracks that led off the main highway into a thick grove of pine. He was home. The familiar 1934 Ford was parked in the grove. She pulled her car in beside it, parked, got out, and ran swiftly, joyfully, down the narrow path to the cottage. She burst into the room after a brief knock on the door and found him lying on the floor, the pot-bellied stove roaring its warmth, his shoes off. He was reading from a volume of Greenhalgh that was propped up on a pillow before him.

"Hey, stranger!" he called. "Pull up a floor and lie down."

She looked down upon him, the love for him flowing from her eyes downward, spilling over him even as his eyes raced upward to meet hers. She made no move to join him on the floor, and he stood up slowly, slipped his feet into the moccasin-type loafers, staring at her all the while. "Special and precious as you are to me, darling," he said as he kissed her, "I can sense something electric and compelling, even more special and precious than before. What is it, nymph? What great and wondrous thing has happened to make you so much more beautiful and appealing and desirable than you were three days ago, the century that has passed since I saw you last?"

She laughed gleefully. "Oh, Gar, Gar! Today I've got an answer for you. And you're the one who has given it to me."

Puzzled, smiling at her happiness, he took her hands into his own, drew her closer to the stove. Now she slipped out of her shoes and knelt down on the carpet where he had been lying before, patting the space next to her for him. He knelt beside her, saying, "I? What have I given you besides my thoughts, my heart, and all the love that is in me?"

"That's it, darling. That's it exactly."

"And what is 'it'?"

"All the love you've given me. Gar, please don't be shocked or frightened. I'm pregnant." The smile, the actual *pride* she felt, these were in her voice.

"You—you're *what*?"

"Pregnant. As an educator you should know it means I'm going to have a baby. Yours."

"Wha—you *mean* it?" He stopped, breathless, and a smile of wonderment came over his face, lighting it up. He rolled over on his back away from her, then leaped to his feet. "Of *course* you do! A baby! A *baby*! I—feel—I don't know *what* I feel!" He looked down upon her, grinning broadly, then pulled her up to him, kissed her. "Oh, Beth, darling, I know I'll be accused of a lot of things, wrong things, but will you marry me right away? Tonight? As soon as I can get my coat on? You can divorce me tomorrow if you want, or after the baby is born, but please, let's get married right away. I think I've got the two dollars for the license."

"It's three dollars, you goony. And you can't get married just like *that*. You've got to have a blood test, a license, then there's a three-day cooling-off period before—"

"*Three whole days*? How can people stand it, being apart so long? It's wrong. An outrage. It encourages promiscuity and I—"

She hugged him tightly. "Don't talk so much, you idiot." She broke away from his clasp and, as they stood holding each other's hands, said, "I told Daddy this is exactly what you would say, what you would want for us. Listen, darling, I've got to leave now. He's waiting at home for me to come back and tell him, and I know—"

Garrett's look was one of shock. "*Your father*! You mean Marcus Radford is waiting at home for you to bring *my* answer to *him*? Good God, Beth, what did he *think* my answer would be? Does he think I'm some kind of sub-mental idiot who—?"

"He doesn't even know *who* you are, let alone what kind of an idiot you are. At least, he won't know until I get home. I've got to run now, darling. I'll see you here tomorrow sometime."

"I'll be waiting here agonizingly for you. All day tomorrow. What good luck it's Saturday. Come early, will you? We've got so many things to work out."

"I'll be here early and don't you worry about our plans. I've got practically every single one of them made already. For just about the rest of our lives." She kissed him again, took his in return. "Back to your books, moron. Learn to say 'I do' without stammering when the preacher asks you a few simple questions sometime early next week."

"Listen. I'll expect to see you early."

"I told you I'll be here."

"Good-by, darling."

She turned in the doorway for a last look as he began to settle down on the floor again. "Gar?"

"What, honey?"

"What kind of an idiot is a sub-mental idiot? I want to know so I can tell Daddy when he asks me just exactly which kind you are."

6.

The dull gray Chrysler, with regular, undistinguishing license plates on it, pulled up in a grove of trees east of Radford Hall and waited. Hessie Loomis hunched over the wheel, smoking a cigarette, waiting, a small grin of secret contentment on his face—the only man Sheriff Bartly would entrust with so personal, confidential, or "sensitive" a matter. And this, Will Bartly had cautioned Hessie, could turn out to be just about as sensitive as a matter could get around Regis.

"I got me a notion Marcus's gal, she's been out playing put an' take with the boys an' somethin's done took."

"Marcus Radford's gal?" Hessie's voice quickened. "Sho now, that's one hide I'd like to put my branding iron to, an' that's a fact."

Bartly said somewhat testily, "Look, boy, I'm warnin' you. Don't you ever get any ideas about gettin' your fingers caught in ol' Marcus's cash drawer, less'n you want to lose a hand. And more, too. He's a bad man to fool around with in this county, or this state, an' that gal happens to be more important to him than both'n his eyes. Or your life. Come you or him, I'm Marcus Radford's man all the way, an' nobody else's. You hear me now, Hessie, boy?"

"I got it, Will. I was only funnin' you. I'm on my way."

"All right. I don't reckon I got to tell you no more'n I already told you. I said I was puttin' my best man on it, so don't you go makin' a brayin' jackass out'n me. Soon's you find out somethin', you git to a phone an' call him. You go ahead now."

Hessie did not have long to wait before the low, yellow convertible shot out of the driveway, heading west toward the river. Christ! he thought, I ought to have me an airplane for this job. He allowed the distance between the two cars to widen, then kept going without any letup in speed. He closed some of the gap between them, keeping his eyes on the twin taillights ahead, pushing hard on his accelerator when he saw it veer to the right suddenly, then disappear from in front of him. His eyes tried to hold the point of departure while the old-looking Chrysler leaped to surprising life, reached that point in a matter of seconds, and shot past it, then he applied his brakes gently when he saw the yellow convertible was parked just off the road beside an old Ford. He swung around in a U-turn and parked his nondescript car on the opposite side of the road, its anonymous gray

blending with the earth, trees, night, and surrounding foliage. He got out and crossed the road on foot, caught a glimpse of Bethann just as she was disappearing into the cottage at the bottom of the path.

Loomis wasted no time, making haste with surprising agility as he ran down the path and circled the cottage in search of a vantage point. On the far side of the small house he found a window through which he could peer, and now he crept to it cautiously. He saw Bethann and the man, whom he could not recognize, since he was lying with his face turned toward the girl. Hessie watched as the man got up to embrace and kiss her. They talked excitedly together, she with her jacket off, the sweater outlining her curvaceous upper body in a way that almost infuriated the deputy with desire. He licked his lips, hoping he might see them together in an act he would enjoy relating in detail to Mr. Marcus Audrey Radford—the god-damned uppity Mr. Big who can look so high and mighty along his nose like he was examining a pile of dirt when he looks at me, even after he takes the payoff money I collect for him every week. Shuhl! Hessie thought with some relish, it'll serve him good and right, havin' to find out about his gal from me!

Now they were lying on the floor together, talking, kissing, touching each other; and then, disappointingly, she was up on her feet again and he was holding her jacket for her to slip into. They kissed again and she started for the door as the man lay down on the floor again. She turned and said something to him, laughed, and was gone. The man lay on his back for a moment, then jumped to his feet ecstatically, and now he turned fully in Hessie's direction and Loomis recognized the high school teacher.

God damn! the deputy mouthed contemptuously. A no-good trashy bookworm got to her! A lousy, no-good—teacher! What the hell's the world comin' to when a load of woman like that takes up with a cracker-poor teacher an' all the time she could be havin' a real man for herself!

He came around from behind the house and emerged at the bottom of the path, watched Bethann as she disappeared at the top of the grade, grinning with admiration at the undulations of her body as she moved forward and upward.

She was gone from his view, and as he began to run up the hill, he heard the motor of her car catch, the squeal of tires as she wheeled it into a turn in the direction from which she had originally come. Swiftly, Hessie followed the path to the top, crossed the road to where his car was parked off the road, got in, and drove to the filling

station about 500 yards up ahead. He went into the public phone booth and called Marcus Radford's number at the Hall.

"Mist' Radford?"

"Yes," came the curt response.

"Dep'ty Sheriff Loomis. Hessie Loomis."

"Yes, Loomis."

"I got some inf'mation for you, Mist' Radford. You want it over the phone?"

"Has she left yet?" Marcus asked sharply.

"She left. She's probably on her way home this minute. Gone exactly the way she came."

"Tell me quickly. What did you find?"

There was a hesitation in Loomis's voice, then, "Well, now, I found the place and the man."

"You're sure?"

"'Course I'm sure." Mild indignation and hurt at the implied accusation. "I'm near the place right this very minute."

Now the hesitation was on the other end of the line. "Did—you—see—anything?" Marcus asked slowly.

Hessie's eyes gleamed malevolently, envisioning Radford's face, knowing what must be coursing through his tormented mind, the agony and suffering he was probably enduring.

"Well, did you?" he heard Marcus's voice again, angry, thunder-heading over the wire.

"Well, now, I don't like to be the one doin' the tellin'—"

"Goddamn it, man, tell me! Be quick about it!"

"Well, I seen 'em," Hessie admitted with mock reluctance.

"You seen 'em. You seen 'em *what*?" Marcus demanded.

"Well, I seen 'em—*doin' it!* Her and that there teacher." His voice was quiet, flat, but assured and positive. There was a deep silence again, but Hessie knew the line was still open and alive. He could hear Marcus's heavy breathing as he said, "Mist' Marcus?"

Silence.

Again, "Mist' Marcus?"

"Yes. Yes!"

"You want somethin' else, Mist' Marcus?"

The voice came alive again, crackling angrily. "Where are you now?"

Hessie told him.

"You wait right there. I'm coming down as fast as my car will bring me."

"Yes, sir. Oakley's is the name of the station. On the left side of

the road. You don't want your daughter to see you, you better come by the old county road. She's a-barrelin' home on the new highway." In mid-speech, Marcus had hung up.

Well, goddamn! Hessie thought with inner glee. Ol' Man Radford, could be he's a man for blood at that! Might see some real action tonight after all!

"—*her and that there teacher,*" Loomis had told him with no further identification of the man. Why did this phrase ring a true note somehow, Marcus Radford thought as he sped toward his rendezvous with the deputy. It was the word "teacher." Teacher. Teacher. And then it came back to him with a rush. Of course! TEACHER! It had to be the one she had interceded for with Thad Clark last year, the one she wanted here in Regis near her. So *he* was the one! She'd brought him along with her from Chancellor like a man would move a mistress about from one place to another. *He* was the reason she hadn't returned to the state university. Brought him home to Regis so he could get a job and she quit college to be here with him. And I didn't even wonder when Thad Clark brought me his file and told me Bethann had asked him to give this—this *bastard!*—the job. Old Thad was interested—or suspicious—enough, but I wasn't, Marcus thought ruefully with self-accusation. And now I'm supposed to wait on *him* while he tells my daughter whether or not he'll do her the favor of marrying her and becoming my son-in-law! Well, we'll see. We'll see. *We'll goddamned well see!*

7.

Bethann pulled the yellow convertible into the back driveway and came to a quick stop, then peered into the open garage looking for Marcus's blue sedan. The big, black limousine was there, but he never used that unless he was going to an important social or political affair with Newton behind the wheel, gloriously decked out in his fine black uniform. The station wagon, used by Newton for shopping errands, was there. The Cadillac sedan Bethann used in rainy weather, or when it was too cold for her convertible, was in its usual place. Marcus's blue sedan was missing.

He told me he would wait until I got back, she said to herself. *I wonder why—what—?*

She wheeled the small car into its stall and ran back toward the house, entering by way of the kitchen. Sudie was drying the last of the dishes. Carrie Dorman came into the kitchen, pulling her long coat over her, and Bethann wondered why she was here so late.

"Hello, Miss Bethann," Carrie said. "I pressed the things you left out this morning. That blue wool skirt—" she shook her head.

Bethann touched Carrie's arm to still her, looking toward Sudie, said quickly, "Can you use it, Carrie? If you can, why don't you take it with you? You're late tonight. Tell Newton I said he's to drive you home." Then anxiously to the old housekeeper, "Sudie, did Daddy say where he was going? Did he say when he would be back?"

"Shuh," Sudie mumbled. "He gotten him a telephone call 'long 'bout ten-fifteen minutes ago. Lit outen beah like a cat got his tail caught in a screen door. 'Gotta go in town,' he holler. 'You tell Miss Bethann I be back later on.' I don' know just what else he say 'cause 'bout that time he fly outen th' door just like 'at."

Bethann and Carrie laughed together. Sudie would never for even a moment permit an opportunity escape when she could dramatize the simplest happening into a major event.

"Thank you, Sudie," Bethann said with relief. She reached out impishly and pulled at the housekeeper's apron strings, watching as the apron began to fall and as Sudie reached for it, managing to catch it before it reached the floor. Sudie retied the strings, snapped and mumbled lovingly at Bethann, just as she had been doing ever since Bethann, as a child, learned that this was an effective means of teasing her. "*You Miss Bethann!*" Sudie shrilled, but Bethann was waltzing happily to the front part of the house, then running up the stairs, remembering suddenly that she must begin to walk lightly. In her room she lay upon her bed and dreamed of being together every lovely day and every wonderful night with Garrett. And later, when Carrie came in to get the blue wool skirt, Bethann lay asleep with a smile upon her face.

It was nearing ten o'clock when Sudie came upstairs, turned on the light in Bethann's room that brought her instantly to a sitting start, asking, "What time is it, Sudie? Is Father home yet?"

"No, he ain' yet, honey. You better git yo'self undressed an' to sleep. Come 'long now," she added with a loving slap at Bethann's backside.

"Sudie," Bethann said, "if I ever get married and leave here, whose backside are you going to slap?"

"Well, missy, whose aprum strings you goin' a undo when a body ain't lookin', huh? Sho now, gal, you know you git yo'self married, you jes' goin' a bring yo' man home to th' Hall to live, tha's what." She smiled, revealing the toothless cavern of her mouth. "When you gettin' married, honey chil? Real soon?"

"Oh," Bethann beamed with delight, "one of these days when I can

find some broken-down old man who's been turned down by everybody else."

"You mean th' one you an' yoah daddy was 'scussin' this afternoon?" Sudie said slyly.

Half-angry, half-shocked, Bethann jumped off the bed. "*Sudie!* Do you mean to tell me you were listening again? Were you?"

The old Negress said calmly, unperturbedly, "Now, now, don' you go gettin' incited in yo' condition, Miss Bethann, honey. You know ain't nothin' 'bout you I ain't never knowed, an' ain' nothin' evah goin' a happen to you I ain' goin' a fin' out, an' it ain' goin' a stop bein' 'at way till I'm a-layin' out theah in th' cemetery, so jus' you let things be th' way they is. Come on, now. You git yo' lazy backside up an' undressed an' int' that bed. Come on, now," she repeated to the frowning girl who stood so indignantly, her mouth partly open. "I'm a-talkin' to you, missy."

8.

It was pitch dark when Marcus pulled his blue sedan into Oakley's Service Station, now closed for the night. He saw the lank, hard body of the deputy as he got out of the gray Chrysler sedan and came toward him, broken nose, the blue-black of his unshaven face, and the inevitable toothpick in the right corner of his mouth that identified him as Hesse Loomis, Will Bartly's right arm. Loomis raised a single extended finger to the brim of his Western-rolled hat in what he believed was a formal salute.

"Where is he?" Marcus Radford said coldly.

"In his shack up the road a piece. Say 'bout 500-600 yards."

"If he hasn't flown the coop since she told him," Marcus said.

"Not this rooster, he didn't, Mist' Radford." Hesse reached into the pocket of his uniform jacket and pulled out a distributor cap. "On'iest way he's got to fly is in his ol' Ford an' right here is that there Ford's wings."

"Good," Marcus applauded briefly. "Get in your car and lead the way."

Marcus pulled off the road behind Loomis's car and Hesse pointed to the Ford without saying a word. He stood beside it and dropped the distributor cap on the seat of the car, then pointed his flashlight to an almost indistinguishable pattern in the dirt with the square toe of his boot. "There's the marks of her tires and here's her footprints. Flat-heel shoes, she was wearin'."

"I know. I know," Marcus said, not knowing how to ask what he wanted to know of this man. In the darkness the cottage below

showed lights through the windows of the front room. "That's the one," Hessie said, pointing it out. "None of the other summer shacks around here got anybody livin' in 'em this time a the year. Say this much for him, he sure got the place fixed up nice and comf'able."

Both stood staring at the cottage in silence. Now a heavy twist of fireplace smoke spiraled upward from the brick chimney. "Gettin' hisself cozy for the evenin', the son-of-a-bitch," Hessie observed, and when Radford remained silent the deputy said quietly, "Look, Mist' Radford, ain' no use you gettin' your hands messed up in this here thing. I kind a got a idea what's needed in a situation like this an' I c'n handle it by myself. 'Course, you want to get th' personal satisfaction out of it, well now, that's somethin' else again. Me, I got a lot of experience, and do you say so, I'll just go on down an' tend to it for you."

Marcus looked away from Loomis with distaste, regretting that he had allowed the man to become involved so deeply in a matter so vital and personal to himself. He said in a low voice, "You've done all I want you to do, Loomis. I won't need you any more. Just keep the whole thing to yourself. Better still, wipe it out of your mind completely. It never happened. Do you understand me?"

"Shuh. Shuh, Mist' Radford. I get the message."

"Don't forget it. I know who the man is and where he lives. That's all I need to know. I'll handle it from here."

"Okay, you want it that way. I'll go along now. It's forgot."

"Thank you, Loomis," Marcus said and went to his car. Hessie preceded him, held the door open for Marcus, closed it and got into the Chrysler, started the motor, and waited for Radford to pull out and unblock the lane. Marcus wheeled into the road, turned right and toward town. Hessie remained until Marcus's car disappeared from view, then cut the motor off again. From his shirt pocket he took a plug of tobacco, bit off a corner, and mouthed it around into a pliable mass.

He sat in the car, morose and sorely disappointed in Marcus Radford. Goddamn chicken-hearted bastard! he fumed silently. Lettin' that teacher get away with something like this. I know what he wants, only he ain' got the guts to do it hisself, not enough even to let me do it for him, by Jesus. Hell, what that teacher needs is a good slappin' aroun' so he'll know damn well he got to marry that gal he got knocked.

Hessie opened the glove compartment and took out a pint of corn whiskey. He uncorked it, spat, and shifted the cud of tobacco to one side of his mouth, took a long pull at the bottle. And another.

Sonofabitch! The thought that Garrett Harwick had possessed the luscious body of Bethann Radford infuriated the deputy beyond all sense of reasoning. He got out of the car and stared balefully down at the teacher's cabin. He took another pull at the bottle, feeling an acute pain, as though the whiskey had gushed over a group of exposed nerves. He shuddered with the hurt of it, then drank more to kill the ache he felt. In a few minutes the bottle was empty, and with mounting fury he threw it at the base of a tree, taking small satisfaction in the crash of splintered glass.

I know what he wants even if he don' know it his own self, Hessie said half aloud to himself. He hitched up his gunbelt and started down the footpath to the cottage.

9.

Garrett Harwick lay on the floor of his cottage in his favorite position, flat on his stomach, legs extended outward, head propped up on one hand, book raised up off the carpet on a pillow. An oil lamp stood beside the pillow, giving him the light to read by. A large, battered, galvanized iron bucket, filled one-third with dirt, served as his ashtray.

After Bethann left him, he had tried to get back to the play he was reading when she burst in, Greenhalgh's *Youthless Men*, likening its characters to the Negroes who lived in Buckeytown, youths who were already men at the age of ten or twelve, who in one way or another must find some means to contribute to the support of their families by going into town in search of odd jobs, running errands, sweeping and cleaning out stores, garages, warehouses, and such. They acted as solicitors for the retail venders of illicit corn whiskey among the whites, made deliveries, worked for the narcotics peddlers, infecting each other with the need for drugs; they acted as shills for the gamblers, as pimps for the whores, both amateur and professional. When all else failed, they walked along the railroad tracks looking for pieces of coal that might have dropped from passing cars. Frequently they would wait for the cars to come along and shout obscenities and feculent phrases at the men who worked the trains, showing themselves as open targets, hoping to incite the men to throw chunks of coal at them.

They grew up and became adults in size, the same kind of adults they had been as children; and when honest work could not be found, they turned to dishonest endeavors; and when they found that this was easier and often more rewarding than honest work, would remain in their dishonest ways, corrupting others along the way.

Thus the daughters found themselves giving their bodies for pay or, in some cases, for pleasure, until they married or lost their looks. The sons chose first to work for the whiskey makers, taking part of their pay in the goods they sold. Some peddled narcotics in various forms; and when times were hard and troublesome, and when they themselves turned toward the cigarettes and finally the heroin capsules, they were no longer useful and therefore were dismissed from their jobs; whereupon, they must go a step farther down the path of degradation and self-destruction and commit burglaries, robberies, and holdups to get the money they needed in order to become customers of the men for whom they once worked. Or, if need be, a wife or daughter must be sent into a brothel or to soliciting on the streets in order to provide bread and milk and meat for the table, the vicious drug for the veins.

Youthless Men they were, indeed.

He put the book aside for the moment and thought with pleasure of Bethann again, the joy in her when she first came into the room, the same joy that had spread to him. Now suddenly, he didn't care about Mr. Marcus Radford at all. Not if he were Midas or Croesus, King or Emperor. He no longer mattered. What had happened between himself and Bethann, this was important and for themselves alone. Garrett Harwick and Bethann Radford. Now they would be married. Now. Not later. Not dependent upon acceptance of his book.

The book. "Cause Without Hope."

It had gone to its first publisher who, after one reading, had turned it down with regret, Maury Wilkerson had written him. Regret, in that a manuscript with a Southern colonial background had already been submitted by one of their contract authors and they must pass up this (as quoted by the publisher) "excellent first novel since it will not fit into our present schedule." Maury had submitted it to a second publisher and it had had one reading and passed the initial test. A second editor was reading it now and Maury had it "from a good friend there, that editor number two is very pleased with it so far." Wilkerson was delighted. "If I know anything at all about this business, and I should after eighteen years in it, I'm willing at this point to gamble my last shirt that they'll take it. We're in, Gar. In another two weeks, three at the most, we'll know." Garrett had gotten the letter only that afternoon and remembered sheepishly that Bethann's electrifying news had driven this good word from Maury out of his mind completely. Tomorrow will be soon enough to tell her, he thought.

The door burst open with a shuddering crash and slammed against the inside wall, rocketing back and forth several times on its hinges before it became still. Garrett looked up, startled, into the strange darkened face of the man who stood in the doorway. He put his hands down flat on the carpet to provide the leverage to spring to his feet and as he moved to do this, Loomis leaped to his side in one catlike spring, raised a foot and brought it down on his shoulder heavily, causing Garrett to fall backward on his side, then on his back, staring upward into the dark face above him. Loomis stood in the dim light of the lamp on the floor, pinning Garrett down with his foot, hands hanging loosely, ready for any action he might need to take. His gun hung ominously from the belt whose brass-headed cartridges glinted in the small light.

Garrett lay back, trying to collect his so-suddenly shattered wits, wondering if this were a madman broken loose from the County Home for the Insane. He had not yet seen the badge from his awkward position and in the bad light. Loomis's face under the wide-brimmed hat was too well shadowed to be recognizable to him. He made a light attempt to dislodge the foot from his chest by moving to one side, but the deputy moved with him, held him anchored to the floor. "No, no. Jus' you lay there quiet-like, mister," Hessie Loomis said, the grin extending itself wider across his mouth.

"Who—who are you?" Garrett asked. "What do you want? If it's money, there are a few dollars in my wallet on the dresser in the bedroom. You're welcome to that without any fuss. Just let me—"

Loomis slid his foot upward from Garrett's chest to a point just below his throat. "Jus' you take it easy, boy," Loomis said, "else you ain't goin' a like what's goin' a happen to you."

"Who the devil are you, anyway?" Garrett's voice showed anger now.

Loomis increased the pressure of his boot slightly. "Shut up, mister!" he snarled savagely. The grin disappeared from his face. "You listen to me for a change. You been a diddlin' aroun' Mist' Marcus Radford's gal an' now you diddled her into a right embarrassin' condition. Man like you, you're smart enough to know there's laws against doin' a thing like that, p'tic'larly when you doin' it with a leadin' citizen's daughter—stay down theah, boy! you ain' a-goin' nowheres till I say so. Now," he continued easily, "we got laws in this here county and state, like I been sayin', but we can't just ee-voke them laws an' go draggin' a prominent gal into a courtroom with her pore li'l ol' swole-up belly for people to laugh at an' be makin' remarks over. That jus' wouldn't be fitten, would it, mister? No, you

can see it wouldn't be. Now, I'm goin' a let you get up on yore feet an' I want you to do it slow an' e-a-s-y, else you goin' a get a few holes in your belly you ain' goin' a be able to plug up with no corks. A'right now." He eased his foot off Garrett and backed off, his legs spread apart. "Get on up slow-like now."

Garrett got to his feet in two stages, first to his knees, then stood upright slowly. Bewildered fury raged inside him, realizing he would be helpless in any physical contest with this man. Now he recognized the uniform and badge, remembered having seen Loomis about town, but never having had a need or reason for contact with him. He tried to remember something Ross Markland had told him about this man and Sheriff Bartly, something salacious that was purported to exist between them, but not having known either man beyond sight at the time, he had given it little thought. Now some of it began to sift back to him.

"You're a deputy sheriff?" he asked needlessly, yet feeling the necessity to say something.

Loomis grinned, hands still hanging below his gun belt, the toothpick jutting upward from the right corner of his lips. "Sho now, don't I look it? Loomis is the name. Hessie Loomis. Chief deputy."

"Loomis," Garrett repeated slowly, "are you serving me with a warrant or arresting me on a complaint of some kind?"

Loomis shook his head from side to side. "No, sir, I ain't. Seein' as how this here happens to be what we call a *sensitive* matter, I been given the job a handin' out some justice personal-like."

"What you really mean is that you're taking the law into your own hands as deputy sheriff, judge, prosecuting attorney, jury, and executioner, isn't it?"

Loomis grinned appreciatively, wiping a hand down over his beard-shadowed face. "Now, I hadn' thought about it in just that exact way, but come to think of it, I guess you're right. Nice thing dealin' with a schoolteacher, you don't have to explain things more'n once." He glanced lightly in the direction of the book-filled shelves, then back to Garrett. "You read all a them books, teacher?" he asked.

Garrett nodded.

"Every last one of 'em?"

"Some of them as many as four or five times."

"My, my. Now ain't that somethin', readin' all that printin'. Me, I never went through but five grades in school. In fac', I ain't never had much truck with schoolteachers, except one li'l ol' gal schoolteacher back in El Paso. But that was a long time after I was out a school myself, so I guess what I learned from her don't count in the

same way your kind a education does. She sure had a pretty way of talkin', too, almost like you. But we kind a seen eye to eye about other things, though. Just as educational, you might say."

Garrett hardly heard him, was barely aware of the words; and then suddenly he realized that Loomis had stopped talking. He said, "Listen, Mr. Loomis, I think I can explain this whole matter and put it to rights."

Loomis squinted at him through nearly closed eyes. "You really think you can do that, teacher?" he asked with incredulity.

"I know I can. Just let me get to the nearest phone so I can call the lady in question and speak with her." He saw the negativeness in Loomis's eyes and added, "Or her father."

The deputy seemed to be digesting this for a few moments, then shook his head again. "Uh-uh, teacher. The lady ain't of her right mind to be makin' any decisions in her present aggravated condition. Far's her daddy's concerned, he only just left me on the upper road not more'n ten minutes ago, so he won't be where we can reach him. 'Fore he left, he said to me, 'Loomis,' he said, 'it's all in yoah hands now. I given him over to you to do with the way you please.' So, boy, ain't nobody but you an' me in on this here chivaree."

Garrett could see no logic in arguing or trying to reason with this brutal force who no longer resembled a man. This was an animal, toying with another smaller animal whom he must eventually kill and devour. He made another effort. "Look here, Loomis, you know this farcical thing you are doing has no bearing on any law or justice. What you are proposing is a one-man lynching."

Loomis grinned crookedly. "Y'see," he said, "f'all your book learnin' you ought to know lynchin's against the law. No, sir. What I'm goin' a do, I'm goin' a give you a lesson in gen'lemanly conduct to a lady. I'm goin' a give you a remembrance so's you won't get it in your head to run off 'thout you marry her first. Come on, teacher, else we liable to wreck this here place a yourn complete."

Garrett almost laughed at the ridiculousness of the situation, then was immediately overcome with anger. "Loomis, you're drunk. If you had eyes in your head you could see—"

But Loomis was beyond reasoning or patience. He put out a massive hand toward the rows of books on the shelves and with a single sweep knocked perhaps a dozen or more volumes to the floor. Garrett stepped forward in a sudden flaming rage, and when the deputy saw the reaction, he took two steps closer to the shelves and began sweeping the rest of the books to the floor, the malevolent grin returning to mock his adversary. He had found a spot more tender

and vulnerable than anything physical so far and was enjoying himself tremendously, hurling books to one side, trampling over those already on the floor, laughing with half-drunken glee.

Garrett, standing only a foot from the stove, reached down quickly and came up with an eighteen-inch length of stove wood, rushed blindly at Loomis, who, bent on his mischief, was turned partially to one side. The deputy heard the movement and veered quickly, but the loose books underfoot threw him off balance. The delay earned him a well-placed clout over his right ear, a second across his face that produced a flow of blood from his nose. With a hoarse roar of rage he threw himself at his attacker, slipped, and fell sprawling over the loose books. As he rose, he took two more solid blows, one in the hollow between neck and shoulder, the other on the arm he had thrown up instinctively as a shield. But now he was on solid ground.

Hessie advanced cautiously toward Garrett, who stood menacingly with his club drawn back, ready for use. The blood from the deputy's nose flowed steadily downward in two streams, dripping over his chin onto his uniform shirt. Both men breathed heavily. As Hessie drew within striking range, Garrett brought the club forward in a short, quick arc. Loomis snatched at the weapon, grasped it in his hand with a triumphant grimace, pulled Garrett forward toward him. He threw a crushing punch that caught Garrett's chest and the club was pulled free in Hessie's hand.

The deputy's grimace turned to a grin of victory. "A'right, now, teacher," he panted, "here's where your lesson begins." He tossed the club to one side and stepped in close to the retreating Garrett, began crossing rights and lefts to his face. Garrett stumbled backward, righted himself, threw his arms up to block the blows, but was no match for the experienced Hessie, who bore in closely now, the full fury of his wrath showing in the short, vicious blows.

Garrett was backed against the wall now, and when Loomis came within inches of him, prepared to put the finishing touches to his victim, Garrett pulled up one knee and, with all the strength left in him, drove it upward sharply into the deputy's groin. The painful shock of the blow threw Loomis backward, toppling him among the books on his back. In desperation Garrett leaped forward, grabbed at the fallen man's holster while Loomis was doubled over, hands pressed to his crotch. Garrett tugged at the leather thong that held the pistol secure and it came loose. The pistol was halfway out of the holster when Hessie, feeling this action, rolled over and away, but the pistol had come loose and lay on the floor among the books.

Hessie, in the more advantageous position on the floor, lunged at it, got his hand around its butt, turned it toward Garrett, who at that moment was preparing to throw himself on the deputy.

Before he could complete his move, Loomis had fired three times. Garrett, the shock of the three blows furrowing his face, staggered to one side and fell to the floor.

Hessie sat up slowly, panting heavily. The smoking pistol in one hand, he wiped the other across his nose to stanch the flow of blood, shook his head to clear it. Harwick lay still, face down, spread-eagled awkwardly over the strewn books. Hessie holstered the pistol and looked thoughtfully around the room, then back to Garrett Harwick.

"Sonofabitch," he said in some surprise, "who'd a thought he had it in him?"

10.

At ten-thirty Bethann began to worry in all seriousness, a strange, unaccountable feeling of impending doom hovering over her. Where was Marcus? Why hadn't he waited for her as he had told her he would? She called the Regis Hotel and talked with Ed Pringle, but Ed told her he hadn't seen Marcus all evening; after which, he went back to the room behind his office where the regular Friday-night poker game was in progress with Mayor Semple Foster, Otis Markland, Sheriff Will Bartly, Jim Tregor, and Marcus Radford. Pringle nodded affirmatively to Marcus, then negatively, and sat down to play his hand; and Marcus knew then that it had been Bethann who had called and that Ed had told her he was not there.

At ten-forty-five Bethann was in a near panic, pacing the floor of her bedroom, damning Garrett's stubbornness for refusing to bring electric and telephone lines into his cottage so she could call him. She came to a decision then and pulled on a pair of warm slacks and woolen shirt, a short heavy coat, wound a scarf around her head. She spun the convertible west along County Road once more and kept it at a steady ninety miles an hour until she came to the turnoff, breathed with relief when she saw Garrett's Ford was still there. She could see a dim light in the cottage through one of the windows, and now she ran down the patch toward it, up the steps to the porch, and threw the front door open.

The fire in the pot-bellied stove showed red coals. The light she had seen from the top of the path came from one lamp on the mantel over the fireplace. She looked with horror at the scattered, trampled blood-smeared books; Garrett's most prized possessions, lying on the floor and under the stove. She sank down wearily on the floor

beside a small heap of his books and tried, through her dazed mind, to piece together or understand what might have happened here. She lowered her head into his pillow that lay on the floor, crying softly with desperation, "Gar, oh, Gar, darling. I'm so sorry. So terribly, terribly sorry."

11.

Somewhere near two o'clock the Chrysler sedan moved down Maple Drive slowly. No house lights were showing. The only street lights were around the Square, five blocks to the north. There were no cars about and no one walked along the streets. Two blocks up ahead a wide panel of light shot across the street from the lobby of the front entrance of the County General Hospital. The figure on the front seat beside HESSIE LOOMIS did not move. It leaned against the right-hand door, covered almost entirely by a dark blanket. The car picked up speed now, and as it approached the entrance to the hospital, Loomis reached over and grasped the door handle on the far side of the car. He raised it and the door swung open. In the same move he pushed at the blanket-wrapped figure. It spilled out into the street between the car and the gutter, rolled toward the pavement.

The car leaped forward now, the door swinging shut with its own momentive force. The car's lights were out. At the next corner the Chrysler turned right sharply and disappeared.

A dozing orderly sat on a bench just inside the entrance opposite the main desk. When he heard the car door slam shut and the screech of tires, he came awake, stretched and walked to the door, and looked out. At first he did not see the form lying in the gutter at the curb, but as his eyes became slowly accustomed to the dimness outside, he saw the bundled blanket in the street and wondered mildly about it. Then he saw the outstretched arm that lay on the curb, the hand. He ran outside for a better look, then back into the lobby, calling for help.

12.

Miraculously, GARRETT HARWICK was still alive when he was carried into the hospital; but there was only the barest spark of life in him. They had wheeled him into the operating room, working on him even as the stretcher was propelled along. When they removed the blanket, they saw that it was stained with blood from three gunshot wounds. The team of surgeons worked over him, repairing, stitch-

ing, transfusing blood into him, working against the most meager odds.

At 7:40 A.M. there was still a flicker of life in him, a nurse and doctor watching him carefully in his room. Outside his door Sheriff Willis Bartly paced slowly up and down the hallway, stopped occasionally to peer into the room, chewed on his cud of tobacco silently, resumed his pacing.

At 11:15 A.M. Dr. Amos Cargill looked up, shook his head at the nurse, turned and walked out of the room. Garrett Harwick was dead. In the hall he lit a cigarette and spoke wearily to the sheriff who had been waiting, Cargill had been told, in hope that the victim might regain consciousness long enough to provide some small clue by which the sheriff's office could work.

Now Bartly walked out to the front of the building where his official car was parked and drove to the Sheriff's Building. In his own office, using his private outside line, he phoned Marcus at the bank. When Radford answered, the sheriff said, "He's dead, Marcus. Seen him with my own eyes. Waited till just now when Amos Cargill made it county-official. No, he never come out of it for even a minute." There was a long pause as he listened, then, "Sho, Marcus, sho. I'll talk to him the minute I see him. Never you mind. I'll take care of it."

Bartly hung up and picked up the other instrument on his desk and spoke into it. "Sam? Loomis in yet? You send him in to me right away, will you?"

Loomis came in, closed the door, then leaned wearily against it, his face grim and drawn. "You want me, Will?" he asked.

Bartly looked at his chief deputy glowering darkly. "You sure went an' done it again, didn't you, you blood-crazy bastard. You hadda go an' get Marcus Radford all stirred and riled up against you, didn't you? And against me, too. Goddamn you, Hessie, do I have to go through my whole life gettin' you out a one thing after another because you got to kill to be happy? Gettin' you out a this withen your whole skin mightn't be so easy this time. Marcus told you hisself to leave it alone, didn't he? He told you he was goin' a handle the rest of it hisself, didn't he? Then what the goddamn hell you hafta go stickin' your busted nose in it after he tellen you that? Why'd you hafta go down there an' kill that boy like you done?"

Hessie said, "Now le's just cool off an' take it easy, Will. I didn't kill him that I know of. He come at me with that club an' I had to pfect myself, didn't I? An' when I dumped him out in front a that

hospital, he was still alive an' breathin'. I had to wait till the streets was cleared off before I could do it, so he lost himself a lot a blood, but I know he was still alive when I dumped him. How we know what them butchers in that operatin' room do to get 'em another body for them students to practice—?"

Bartly turned away and spat a gob of brown juice into his cuspidor. "You know damn well that's only a story they use to scare the niggers with, so you lucky it's only me you tryin' to make swallow that for an excuse. An' how c'n I explain why you went down to that cabin at all? I don't rightly know what the hell to do about it. Ol' Marcus Radford, he's hotter'n a hog sittin' on a bed of red-hot coals right now. Maybe you better take you a vacation till this thing blows over. Maybe by then Marcus'll cool off a little. I'll let you know when you can come back. If ever."

"Sho, Will. I'll do just that. Anything else you want me for right now?"

Bartly spun around in his chair and spat angrily toward the brass cuspidor again, missed it by a good four inches, making him even more angry. "Goddamn it, Hessie, you still don't see the point. An' this still ain't goin' a teach you you can't go around killin' anybody you feel like, is it? Killin' niggers is bad enough. This killin' a white man is somethin' else again, by sure God, an'—"

"Since when you taken up with niggers, Will?" Loomis asked coldly.

"Ever since you come here to Regis and got to thinkin' you can kill 'em off for no good reason at all 'cept that you got a badge on you an' you hate 'em all."

"I got me the best reason in the world to hate 'em all, Will," Loomis said with sudden harshness, "an' nobody ought to know it better'n you. Listen to me, Will, an' I'll tell you again." Bartly looked up at Loomis, saw his fingers grip his gunbelt so that his knuckles gleamed white even in the shadows. He turned away, unwilling to listen, hearing the venom in Loomis's voice, the pure, bitter hatred that poured out of him as he spoke.

"She was nineteen and we'd been married only a few months. Just that mornin' she tol' me we was goin' a have a baby and I guess that's about the happiest I ever was in my whole life. A deputy sheriff in a nice, comfortable Texas town like Richvale, with a pretty wife an' my own baby on the way. I'd got me a nice piece of reward money for catchin' up with Mike Kirbett and bringin' him in, \$2000 in the bank to start the baby off with. Everything a man could want.

"An' then I come home that night and found her. Dead. Raped

and strangled with her own stocking." Hessie labored heavily with each word, each breath, while Bartly looked down at his own hands, unable to hold the look of his chief deputy with his own eyes.

"They got her. Yeah, they got her. She was dead and the baby inside her was dead, too, and the nigger smell was still on her. That night, Will, I killed me four niggers. I'd a killed every last one of 'em in Richvale and Cobb County if the sheriff hadn't got me out a town an' headed in this direction. That was nigh eight years ago and it's a little better now, Will, but not much. No, not much. An' I still hate 'em enough to take their women like they taken my wife, an' when it's against their will, I like it all the better.

"An' you ought to know how I feel, Will, an' that I got a right to feel the way I do. You ought to know that better'n any other man except me, Will, *because she was your own sister!*"

Hessie spat into the cuspidor, his face dark with anger, his tone filled with contempt for his brother-in-law. "You want to ask me again how come I kill niggers, Will?"

When Bartly would neither look up nor answer, Loomis went out of the office and closed the door behind him.

13.

Bethann knew. In some unfathomable way, she knew that Marcus Radford was behind Garrett Harwick's brutal murder. She had heard often enough that similar things happened time and again to a Negro in the past who had had a finger pointed at him by some white girl or woman who screamed hysterically, "That's him! He's the one! He's the one who raped me! I *know* it was him!" And it mattered not when later investigation revealed that the night in question had been moonless and dark, that the incident had occurred in a dark alley or field or under other circumstances that made positive (or even casual) identification impossible. She had heard, too, of cases in which a Negro had been lynched or legally executed and that later, the white girl had confessed that she was still intact; or when not, that she had been afraid her parents might learn she had been experimenting—willingly—with a neighbor boy; in other cases, where a single woman did not want a white lover to be discovered and named as the cause for her pregnancy; or the man might be married to a friend, could possibly be a relative.

But this was a white man belonging to no one else but herself! White, intelligent, sensitive, loving, *who wanted to marry her*, and had been reluctant only because of her wealth and social position that he felt he could not match; who stood ready to marry her, re-

gardless of these facts, the moment she had told him; so guileless that he did not even know of such things as law-required blood tests and three-day waiting periods.

I know I'll be accused of a lot of things, he had said; meaning people would say he married her for the Radford money, perhaps in the vulgar way they once said that her grandfather, Justin Radford, had married Lucyann for the Turner fortune; *but will you marry me right away?* he had pleaded. *Tonight? As soon as I can get my coat on?* He had meant it, she knew. She knew the difference between talk and action in him.

She had returned home numbed with fear, afraid even to think what might have happened after she saw the condition of Garrett's cottage, his precious books torn and scattered about, the other signs of a bitter struggle. She didn't even get out of the car when she arrived back at the Hall, but turned around in the driveway and went directly into Regis, to the sheriff's office; but the desk man had told her Sheriff Bartly was down somewhere around Clinton investigating a case of hog theft. The chief deputy was with him, the man said.

He took down the details and said he would send a deputy to investigate at once, although, he added unconcernedly, it sounded like some nigger from nearby Buckeytown might have broken in during Harwick's absence and, finding no cash, or anything that could be converted into cash, had taken his revenge by destroying the books. "Happens all the time in those summer shacks," the desk man had told her.

She left then, knowing that this was not so, knowing why. Her face was tear-streaked as she drove home again to wait for Marcus. In the early morning hours it came to her even more forcefully than before that Marcus had to be the man hiding behind whatever it was that had happened to Garrett.

Bethann was asleep when Marcus crept into the house a little past four in the morning, removed his shoes, and tiptoed stealthily up the stairs. He undressed in the dark and fell into a restless, fogged sleep.

At 10:50 Bethann was awakened by Sudie bearing her breakfast tray as she always did on Saturday mornings. "Come on now, Miss Bethann, honey. It's as purty a Saddy's you evah seen in yo' whole life. A fine day to be out ex-cisin' one a them fat, lazy hosses a yourn. Seem lahk—"

The chatter brought Bethann back to alertness. "Sudie! Is Daddy still home?"

"Home? Him? Honey, this a Saddy, a big day at th' bank. No, sugar, he lef' more'n a hour ago. Didn' any more'n taste his coffee, even."

Bethann reached for the bedside phone to call him, then decided against it. She would go to the bank and see him face to face. She gulped down the orange juice, sipped at the coffee, then started to dress.

"How 'bout them aigs an' sassidges an' toast an' jam I fix up special fo' you, Miss Bethann?" Sudie complained.

"Be quiet, Sudie, *please*. Turn on the radio for me, will you, please? Hurry!"

Sudie turned on the radio and the eleven o'clock newscast was coming on; she heard the lead story and halted in pulling on her warm slacks, sitting on the side of the bed. It was about a man who had been dumped out of a car in front of the County General Hospital early that morning, a still-unidentified man who even now lay near death. As the broadcaster related the story, Bethann began whispering, "It's Garrett. It's Garrett. I know it's Garrett."

"Wha' garret? Whose garret you talkin' about, Miss Bethann? You ain' even listenin' to what the man sayin' bout a man—"

Bethann flung herself off the bed, upsetting the tray, pulled a sweater over her head as Sudie wailed over the spilled coffee, sausages, eggs, and jam. "Runnin' out a heah dress' like one a them tramps, tha's what. You put some more clo'es on, missy, else I'll spank you' behin' lahk I used—"

"Shut up, Sudie, and get out of my way! I'm in a hurry," Bethann exclaimed in desperation. She grabbed for a short jacket, tucked it under her arm, and dashed down the stairs, Sudie attempting to follow, calling after her, "Take yo' warm coat an' a sca'f fo' yo' haid, Miss Bethann. It's col' out dere."

She raced the roadster into town as fast as Saturday traffic would permit. At the hospital she parked in the space just vacated by the sheriff's official car, ran inside the building she knew so well. She saw Dr. Cargill walking wearily toward his office at the rear of the hall and ran swiftly toward him.

"Doctor! Doctor Cargill!" she called. He stopped, turning toward her, alarmed. "Miss Radford. What is it? What—?"

For a moment or two she could not speak for her breathlessness and the dryness and ache in her throat. Cargill reached out and took the hand that she had raised and now held extended toward him, trembling.

"What is it, Miss Radford? You're so overwrought. Come here and sit for a moment."

Now she found her voice again. "The man they—picked up—this morning, Doctor."

He nodded. "The young schoolteacher, Garrett Harwick," he said.

Even the mention of Garrett's name, which she had not heard until this moment, came as a natural thing to her since intuitively, she had known it all the while. "The radio said he—he—" She saw the answer written on the chief surgeon's tired face. "He's—he's—dead," she finished, flatly, no question in her voice now.

Cargill saw the dull, lifeless look on her face and moved toward her, but she turned and ran blindly away from him and down the hall toward the front entrance. The courthouse clock sounded its twelfth note when she walked into the bank and Miss Carston mentally counted out the four twenties, one ten, one five, and five one's, but Bethann did not stop, not even to nod. She went past the tellers' cages in a dazed, dreamlike walk, past her father's secretary's desk that was vacant at the moment, opened the door to his private office. He sat behind his big desk, Miss Marshall beside him with notebook resting on crossed knee, pencil poised. The secretary looked up, startled that anyone would dare walk into Mr. Radford's office without first knocking. Then she saw the sleepwalker's stare on Bethann's face. She turned toward the banker and saw the ashy gray look of guilt—or fear—on him, then rose and went quickly out of the same door through which Bethann had entered.

When they were alone, he said in a low, hoarse voice, "Beth, honey—"

The sleepy look went out of her eyes and now they were alive. "Why?" she asked. "*Why did you do it? Why did you do this to me?*"

"I? I didn't do anything, Beth. What are you accusing me of?"

"You had it done. You had him killed."

"Killed? I didn't have anybody killed. What are you talking about?"

"Garrett Harwick. The man. The man who—who was—going to marry me—this week. The man I loved. The only man I ever loved—or will ever love."

She stared at Marcus and the unchecked tears began to flow and Marcus had no words with which to answer her accusation. Her words began to flow brokenly. "A fine, decent, intelligent man you never even knew. *You never even knew him!* You killed a man you would have been proud to call your son, all because you couldn't wait an hour for me to come home and tell you all about him, how he begged me to marry him as soon as I told him that I was pregnant with his child. All because your own outraged feelings were more important to you than your daughter's whole life. Than your own!

You let your stupid pride kill him. *Pride!* Don't you know that when you had him killed, you killed me, too? Don't you even know what you killed? I'll tell you, Father. You killed the last bit of love or respect I had for you!"

"Beth, honey," Marcus, white-faced and desperately afraid, said, "You don't know what you're saying. I swear I had nothing to do with his death. He was—"

Bethann's hand slapped downward on the desk in a sharp report. "How can *you* tell me what he was? You don't know what he was because you never knew him. I doubt if you've ever *seen* him. And I know well and good what I'm saying. Let me say it again, slowly, so you'll know I really mean it. You'd have been better off if you'd caught us there in bed together and had both of us killed at once, because I'm going to make you wish you had. *I hate you!* And I'll hate you until one of us is buried and I don't care which one of us goes first! But don't you ever stand in my way again, no matter what, do you hear me? Because if you do, I swear on Garrett Harwick's dead body that somehow, in some way, I'll kill you with my own hands!"

She tried to swing around and away from him, but he had grabbed and held her arms with his hands. She did not struggle but stood rigidly still, arms dangling at her sides, breathing hard.

"Bethann, Bethann, you don't realize what you're saying," Marcus cried. "You can't turn on me in a single moment like this and you can't wipe out twenty years of your life, nor mine, with a few angry words. I'm not dead, nor are you, and until one of us is, you are my daughter and I'm your father and nothing on earth can change that. You listen to me, Bethann. You'll forget—"

"Forget? You think I'll forget him? No, I won't. Never! Last night I lay awake and remembered everything so hard, not only about Garrett, but a lot of other things. I remembered one night when I was a little girl and I remembered my mother again and that it was you she blamed and cursed that night for what you had done to her. I remembered a lot of things about a lot of people, men coming to the house late at night to talk to you about something they wanted for themselves, or needed, or something you wanted. People coming to you crying because they lost something or somebody, someone who did something you didn't like and so they had to move away from here, or someone who'd been sent to jail, or maybe even had been killed, just like Garrett Harwick was killed. That's what I've remembered for my twenty years: how strong and powerful you are in this county, in this state, so that people have to come crawling

to you, begging you for the things that should be theirs without begging. That's how I remember you now, the way you are, the thing you are, the big, powerful Caesar, standing there smeared with somebody else's blood all over you!"

She turned from him and his arms dropped helplessly, weakly, away from her. She ran from his office through the bank, the eyes of some thirty or forty startled people following her passage.

Marcus sat frozenly in his office. His first instinct was to follow Bethann, but he realized that this, in her present state, would be a useless gesture. Now, for perhaps the first time in his life, he knew a new and different kind of fear—fear coupled with a sense of deep loss. Always conscious of the gap that existed between them, he knew now that it had widened beyond repair, that no matter how honestly he could state—or swear—that he had not put a finger on the man, the blame for it would rest on him. And knowing that he could have—should have—taken stronger measures to restrain Loomis, he felt the guilt of it all the more, no matter how he squirmed and twisted to rid himself of this burden.

To identify himself so fraternally with Loomis now gave him a feeling of being unclean. In what way, he asked himself, were his hands cleaner than Loomis's? Only in the final execution? No; both were equally guilty. What would be now, he wondered bitterly. How would this thing between Bethann and himself resolve itself?

And how, he wondered, does a man dissolve a wall of steel?

14.

She lay on her bed and tried to lose herself in the memory of everything that had ever happened between Garrett and herself, every loving, joking, serious, and tender moment between them; every act of friendship, companionship, of love; that first time, the very first time when he had actually resisted, explaining to her the dangers that lay in such an act; and she remembered that she had ignored his resistance and had pressed herself upon him by the simple device of undressing and letting him find her in the dark, helpless to resist; the beauty of that moment when they lay spent in each other's arms, unwilling to part, each feeling the inner throb of the other's excitement. She knew then that his protestations were only for her, but she had actually plotted and forced it; and even with her own uncertainty and fear for the unknown to come, she had shown not even the slightest hesitation or movement of withdrawal from him, only acquiescence so that he would not blame himself in any way.

She brought back each detail vividly in her mind, how they lay

close together, his lips tracing a pattern of light kisses over her forehead, across her eyelids, the bridge and tip of her nose, cheeks, mouth, chin, neck, and shoulders. She had lain quietly, relaxed in his arms, warm to his touch, and then his hands and lips were arousing desire in her again and she began to respond with her lips and body. Recalling the tears in his eyes and knowing for the first time the true depth of the sentimental side of him. Even now, here and alone, her thoughts brought it all back to reality.

"Beth, Beth," she could hear his whisper

"Yes, darling."

"I love you so deeply, so completely. You are the most magnificent of all women, the answer to all my dreams of love," he said.

She replied jokingly, "And just exactly how many women does that put me ahead of?"

Abashed, he said, "Not many, I suppose." Then seriously, "But that—" he shrugged— "was all—nothing. Nothing and meaningless. Play, I guess you could call it. Being one of the boys. This is so very different, Beth. Everything. I need you to complete my life, make it into something whole and meaningful."

She raised her extended forefinger to his chin and pressed against it, saying, "You forgot to add the two words that will take care of everything."

"Which two words?"

"'Marry me,'" she said.

"I want to, darling, so very much."

"Then—?"

"I remember and remember and keep remembering who I am and who you are. The poor, obscure schoolteacher and the richest girl in Regis County; asking you to share a summer fishing cabin within a half mile of Buckeytown. With no electricity, with only a kitchen pump for water, the most primitive of bathroom facilities. And with all these, my worldly goods and possessions, do I thee endow."

"And all I can think of," she replied, "is that next to my large room and private bath at Radford Hall is another large room, unused, and how we can easily make it into a sitting room for our own private use and create a nice, large apartment within a nice, large house."

"And I to take a job in one of Marcus Radford's many enterprises and become a professional son-in-law?"

"No, Garrett, not that. You will continue to teach, or write, or do both if you want, and Marcus Radford will be as remote in your life as you want him to be. Or as close."

It hadn't been easy to convince him that this would be so and

she didn't want to press the subject then. They would find a way, she knew. It would take some time and planning, but she was certain it would work out because both knew they were so right for each other. So very right. And then Dr. Roland had discovered her situation, had in fact confirmed the small suspicion in her own mind, and suddenly this had become the answer, the only logical answer that could bring them together sooner. She had been so sure of the whole thing, so sure that she felt no fear in facing up to Marcus, not knowing as she did so that her words were signing away Garrett's life.

Sudie came into the room and Bethann pretended to be asleep. The old Negress pulled the blanket up over her shoulders and closed the blinds, then went out, closing the door softly.

Don't be afraid, Doctor. I know my father is capable of— She had wanted to say "violence" and had changed her mind for some reason. *I know he will be angry and hurt, but I think I know how to handle him. I'll wait for the right moment.*

A wave of harsh, bitter laughter wracked her with silent hysteria. She knew how to handle Marcus Radford, did she? *Wait for the right moment*, she had said. And when is the right moment to admit to a Marcus Radford that his unmarried daughter is pregnant?

And over all else, she thought, *How can I pay him back?*

For a while she dozed, then slept, but her sleep was light and without depth and she couldn't live with her dreams any more than she could with her thoughts. She lurched awake, lay still for a moment, then turned on her side and pounded her clenched fist into her pillow. The tears began to fall again.

No matter what device she employed to drive her thoughts away, he came back to her as she had seen him last: happy, excited with the thought that they would be married within the week. Other vagrant thoughts came back to her, some that had been long forgotten. Now she tried to remember lines from the volumes they had read together, stopping to repeat and memorize. One such line came back to her, this from "Cause Without Hope," a line of dialogue in which a Colonel Tallant had said, *Grief, sadness, and torment; these are merely words without meaning unless one has felt them, lived with them.*

Now she understood. Grief, sadness, and torment. These were what she was living, would know forever.

She felt stifled, as though the walls were closing in on her, and

got out of bed and went downstairs, nightgown flowing behind her, bare feet noiseless on the thick carpet. She padded to within a few feet of the kitchen. The door was open and she could hear Sudie mumbling to herself as she bustled about her work. It was Saturday afternoon, she remembered. Carrie Dorman had already gone for the day. She went into Marcus's study and opened the sliding panel behind the small bar, removed a full bottle of bourbon, ripped away the foil, pulled the cork out by its extended lip. She took a drink from the bottle, coughing over its first bite, a trickle running out of the side of her mouth; she forced herself to take another drink, wondering how long it would take before some kind of tranquilizing effect would take hold and drive out her thoughts so she could be at peace with herself. She took another sip and began to feel a glow of warmth as the liquor spread out inside her. She took the bottle back to her room and stood it on the dresser while she took off the nightgown and pulled on a slip, skirt, and sweater, stepped into a pair of flat-heeled shoes. She took another drink from the bottle, noticing that its passage was easier and smoother now. The next one seemed to grab hold and lessen the tension, the rigidity in her. Her head and body felt light, the early dull heaviness lifted away. She corked the bottle again, carrying it by the neck as she went slowly down the stairs, listened cautiously near the open kitchen door, heard Sudie discussing her with Newton.

"Sho now," the old Negress was mumbling, "him takin' on lahk 'at. Shuh! Ain' nothin' t' be makin' such a big fuss ovuh, 'specially when she in love wif him an' him wif her an' they get married jus' lahk she tell Mist' Marcus. Shuh! Men! Ain' got the sense th' good Lawd given to a chinch bug!"

"Well," Newton argued, "'twas his own gal, wasn' it? You think it all right fo' her to go sleepin' aroun' like 'at, comin' home with some strange man's baby an'—? He seem like such a nice boy, Mist' Ga'ett."

"Shuh! An' why not, do she love him an' he love her? Might even he'p both 'em to make up theah minds, do they know what it goin' a be like aftuh they married."

"But that baby, he goin' a be born in sin," Newton persisted.

Sudie snorted scornfully. "He still goin' a be born the way he's goin' a be born, ain' he? Born in sin, you says? Born in sin? Yah! Ain' no baby lahk this un'd ever get born in sin. 'At baby, he'll get born jus' lahk eve'ybody else in this world was borned, because the good Lawd say he be born. Don' you go talkin' no sin about a baby lahk Miss Bethann's, you dumb nigger, you. No suh. Born in love, he'll

be. An' dey're d'bes' kin'. The wanted kin'. On'iest thing is, he won' have no daddy fo' sure now."

Bethann bit her lips to hold back the tears and slipped quietly out of the house through the side door, running lightly toward the garage. She felt flushed and her head was hot. The whiskey was reaching her now and she shook her head to clear it. The garage began to move in a circle around her, and when she looked away, across the fields toward the woods, the grass and trees and sky seemed to be swirling around in a dizzy, swift motion. She turned toward the road and saw Marcus's blue sedan coming up the highway in the distance, rushing toward the Hall. She ran toward her car, then remembered Sudie and Newton. If they heard her leave, they would tell Marcus the moment he came and asked for her. No, he wouldn't have to ask. He would have seen her. She turned and ran behind the garage, past the stables, gathering speed as she ran hard downfield toward the woods and creek. She wanted only to be away from him, where she would not have to see him, talk to him.

And then she thought of the perfect refuge, one she hadn't remembered in years—the unused playhouse in the woods that she hadn't seen for so long. Now she felt the urgent, desperate need to go there, to return to a more peaceful era in her life.

Chapter 7

1. December, 1941

It was shortly after noon that Saturday when Luther Dorman and Robbie Tilebin finished tying the broken fence wires together. For over a month the wide gap in the fence had been a means of escape for Luther's two setters, Hoot and Holler. Not that he minded as long as they came home safely, but they had taken to crossing the highway and Hoot had almost been hit by a passing truck. Luther asked Robbie for the loan of the wirepuller and Robbie had gladly obliged with the piece of equipment from the toolshed at the Hall and his help.

In the six years he had been in Regis, Robbie had come to feel an immense freedom and sense of belonging, so vastly different from the crowded cities and intolerances he had known in the North. After his first job over in the Swamp, he had talked to his Grandfather Mordecai and was elated with the maintenance job at Radford Hall. A year later he married Lida-Mae Lukens and became a proud father only fourteen months ago. He lived in his own house in Buckeytown and had a small savings account at Mr. Marcus's bank. And he was happier than he had ever been in his life.

Occasionally he would find the time to take to the woods with Luther and the two would hunt together; at times they would be joined by Dale Hagen, who was a fine hunter and an excellent shot with rifle and shotgun. Sometimes they would fish together, and soon Robbie had begun to lose the thought that a Negro and a white man could not be friends.

They stood together now, Robbie smoking the cigarette Luther offered him, work gloves tucked under his left arm, broad, naked chest expanded as he inhaled with obvious enjoyment. He reached over and tugged hard at the taut wire with one hand, testing it. "I guess that'll hold it for now," Robbie said. "That old wirepuller sure does the trick, don't it? Man could pull his back and arms off, he couldn't get it close to being as tight as it is now." He reached for

his khaki shirt that hung on the near post. Again the day was sunny and bright and unseasonably warm.

"That's for sure, Robbie," Luther agreed. "Thanks a lot. I sure appreciate you helping me." Luther tested the wire with a series of short, hard tugs and nodded his satisfaction with the mending job.

It was at this moment they heard the distinctive roar of Bethann Radford's convertible and looked up, both smiling in her direction, Luther's hand already raised upward in a wave of recognition. But Bethann's eyes were on the road ahead of her and did not see them as she raced homeward from town. As the car tore past them at a furious speed, Luther said admiringly, "Man, what a car! I'll bet she's doing near a hundred."

"I'll take half your action," Robbie said in agreement.

"Some driver, Miss Bethann," Luther remarked.

Robbie did not answer, refusing instinctively to pass a direct comment one way or the other on a white woman in the presence of a white man.

"She sure is a real nice girl," Luther said.

"I guess I'll take the wirepuller back to the toolshed and catch my bus home. I'll see you around, Luther."

"Sure. And thanks again, Robbie. You been a big help. I'd a been all day trying to do the job myself."

"That's okay." Robbie buttoned the last two buttons of his shirt, stuffed the tails into his blue denim trousers, then bent down to pick up the wirepuller that lay against the fence. He straightened up and turned hesitantly away once more. Luther caught the movement and said, "What is it, Robbie?"

"Luther," Robbie asked, "you think there's going to be a war with the Japanese?"

"No more'n what I see in the papers or hear on the radio." He shook his head in doubt. "Gets so you don't know who to believe, or what. One fellow comes out and says, 'No, there's no chance of a war. The Japs know when they're well off.' And right behind him comes another one and he says, 'There's bad news tonight.' Last night one of 'em was saying we'll be in a war for sure before the year is over." He smiled with some doubt. "That gives us less'n a month to get caught up on what needs to be done, Robbie."

"You ain't worried, are you? You registered for the draft, ain't you, Luther?"

"Sure, I'm registered. But they told me as long as I'm classified as a farm worker, I won't have to go in. Not unless a full-sized war breaks out."

Robbie's mouth twisted into a smiling grimace. "I sure hope they're wrong. Man, I don't want to get caught up in that draft. We got us one boy and Lida-Mae, she's already working on our next one."

"Well, congratulations, Robbie. Shoot, I wouldn't go worrying about no war, no matter how much those Japs are yelping around like hounds after a fox. Japan's a little old place with a lot of little old men running around yapping their fool heads off. I seen some of 'em in the newsreels at the show just the other night. Hell, ain't any of 'em could come up to your bellybutton, it looked like. They'd be corn-crazy to start anything with us."

"How about that Hitler, killing off people the way he's doing. Deacon, he's telling us Hitler's killing off all the Jews as fast as he can so he can get around to us colored folks next."

Luther spat into the ground. "Hell, he can't do nothing to you less he gets here first, can he? And there's a lot of water between us and him, ain't there?" Luther said emphatically.

"Deacon, he says Hitler don't need to come over here. He's already got him plenty of people everywhere over here ready to pull the ropes when he gives the word."

"Robbie, don't you believe everything you hear or you'll start looking around behind every tree for Kluxers, too. You go on home and have a time for yourself. This is Saturday, the sun is shining, and I'm going to town tonight. I got to go home now, get me a towel and take a bath in the creek before the sun goes down."

"Br-r-r!" Robbie exclaimed with a short laugh. "Man, you'll freeze your tail off out there. Once the sun goes down and you got your clothes off, that ain't any place to be."

"I know, but it's a sight better'n crawlin' in an old washtub in the kitchen. Getting my six-feet-two in a tub ain't easy any more. I'll get to the creek before the sun's down, though. So long, Robbie, and don't you worry too much about the war."

2.

Luther came up on the back porch and started toward the kitchen door, then saw the *No Admittance* signal hanging over the glass panes of the door: a bed sheet to indicate that privacy was desired, that Carrie was home from the Hall and was in the washtub, half-filled with heated water, taking a bath. He walked around to the front porch where Jud sat asleep in his rocker, a patchwork quilt draped over his lap. At his side on the floor was a bottle with about three inches of corn whiskey in it. A six-day growth of beard, stiff gray spikes, sprouted from his lined face. The overcoat he wore was

an old, once-expensive garment Carrie had brought home from the Hall ("b'longed to ol' Marcus Radford hisself, by God!" Jud boasted), and now, like everything else about him, it was filthy and disreputable, sleeve cuffs shiny with frequent nose wipings, tobacco spittle and food droppings on its lapels and front. Brown fluid drooled out of the side of his mouth, Luther noticed with disgust, as he slept off this intermediate stage of his daily drunkenness.

He frowned as he walked past Jud and into the house. The kitchen door at the end of the hallway was open now, so he knew Carrie was finished with her bath and would be in her room dressing. He went past her closed door, drummed his fingers on it, called, "Hi, Car. I'll empty the tub for you."

"Thanks, honey," she called back. "I'll be out in a few minutes."

He went into the kitchen, opened the door to the back porch, then came back and lifted the heavy tub easily, carried it outside to let the soapy water run out down toward the draining ditch. He took the tub over to the pump and sluiced it clean, then hung it from a nail on the porch and came back into the kitchen, picked up the towel where Carrie had stood drying herself. He took that out to the porch and draped it over the rail. He went to the hall closet and got a fresh towel and a pair of shorts, T shirt, fresh tan slacks, and khaki shirt. Carrie came out of her room as he passed it and they walked into the kitchen together. "You finished for the day?" she asked.

"Yep. It's easy when you got the right tools. Robbie and I fixed it in less'n an hour."

"Good for you. Now maybe Hoot and Holler might live a little longer. You have any cigarettes on you?"

Luther threw the packet to her. "There's a few in there. If you want more, take some out of my closet. There's a carton there."

She didn't say anything about that, but he knew she was thinking of the times when he had come to her for cigarettes; and now, with this job of his, the one she hated even to think about, everything was changed.

"You going into town tonight?" she asked.

"Maybe." He saw her look of concern and laughed as he put an arm around her shoulder affectionately. "Shoot, Car, don't you worry about me like I was ten years old. I won't get in no trouble. I promise you."

"I know," Carrie said, drawing on her cigarette. "There never was a boy or girl your age who never said the same thing. Even Miss Bethann—" She stopped suddenly, seeing him come alert at the mention of her name.

"Miss Bethann? What about her? I just seen her flyin' past in that streak of lightning of hers, *zoom!*—like a shot out of a rifle."

"I—well—nothing. You going down to the creek, you better hurry or it'll be too cold. Go on now before the sun goes down. And don't fool around too long. I'm going to have a good supper for us to-night."

He picked up the towel with the change of clothing and started for the back door, put a hand on the knob, then turned back to Carrie, a frown corrugating his forehead. "Miss Bethann, she in some kind of trouble?" he asked.

"No, silly. I guess not. When you're rich as the Radfords, what kind of trouble can you be in that you can't get out of?"

"Well, you said—"

"I said nothing. Now you get along or you'll freeze out there. I can't for the life of me see why you can't use the washtub in the kitchen with nice hot water, the way I do."

"What?" he squealed in mock outrage. "While you're walkin' around me fixing supper? Now shame on you, Car, talkin' that way to me. You—"

Carrie blushed furiously, pushed him toward the door. "You and your poolroom-dirty mind," she said.

Luther turned, evaded her, and flicked the towel sharply, catching her retreating backside with an end, causing her to yelp at its sting. "You Luther!" she screeched. "*Scat!* or I'll take a broom to you!"

Luther ran out into the yard, leaped over the low hedge in simulated terror as Carrie went back into the kitchen to start supper, a smile of deep affection for him on her face.

3.

The sun was still warm, the water cool, and the air brisk—the combination invigorating. Luther kept all but his head submerged while he soaked away the surface accumulation of farm dirt and sweat, then began to swim back and forth with vigorous strokes as he huffed and chortled aloud to release his pent-up energies. He ran naked up the bank and soaped himself thoroughly from head to foot, then dove into the water again, swimming with porpoiselike nimbleness and enjoyment. He emerged after a while to dry himself briskly with the rough towel, dressed in the fresh clothes he had brought, rolled the soiled garments into the damp towel.

He started home with a mild reluctance, climbing the short rise of the bank through ferns and winter wild flowers, hoping he might see Cressie Jackson, disappointed that she hadn't joined him, al-

though he knew she seldom came to swim this late in the year. During the winter she would occasionally contrive to meet him here, and when he was finished his swim, they would go off together to the old playhouse in the woods for an hour or so.

It was past four, he guessed roughly. Dale had asked tentatively, hopefully, if Luther would take his Saturday-night run for him, but Luther had been out on the Friday run to Gibson, returning after two in the morning. "If I can make it, Dale," he had told his friend, "I'll be at Tam's around six-thirty or seven. If I'm not there by seven, I can't make it."

No Cressie today, he thought ruefully, picturing the nineteen-year old light-skinned Negress in his mind. She would never make a definite point of meeting him. "If I'm there, I'm there," she would say, "and if I ain', then maybe I got somethin' else to do. Or maybe it's my time. B'sides, I got Pa an' Ma to watch out for. They keepin' a good eye on me most a th' time."

He walked along slowly, thoughtfully. Now that the financial pressure was off, he was happier about many things. Soon he would begin working on Carrie to quit her job at the Hall. He might even start on her tonight, ask her to go into town with him, take her shopping, buy a few things for her with his own money, treat her to a movie. He laughed to himself with some pride; a real boy-and-girl date with his own sister, paying for everything with money he had earned all by himself and not a cent of it come from Marcus Radford's charity. And what's more, by God, he'd enjoy it, too.

Poor Carrie, he thought, she never went anywhere, had no boy friends like other girls. Nor girl friends. She was good-looking enough when she prettied up with lipstick and wore one of the several good dresses Miss Bethann had given her. She belonged in better clothes, not the cheap cottons and gingham she wore around the house or to work in at the Hall. Fixed up proper, Carrie would easily outshine most, might even give Miss Bethann a little run for her money, he thought loyally.

When he would think of Carrie in these terms, Jud would invariably intrude. Jud, who, he knew, was the reason for her lonely existence, why no men came to court her, ask her to a church social, a picnic or party or a dance or just a movie. Jud. Frowning, spitting, hawking, cursing, suspicious and accusing. He could remember clearly the several times that Jud had been responsible for driving away at least three men who had been interested in Carrie—the last, Fred Archer, who had asked her to marry him; but Carrie could not leave Jud and Luther, who had been thirteen or fourteen then,

together. And so Fred, like the others, had gone away, married another girl, and was now the father of two children.

4.

Luther walked briskly toward the rise and paused on its crest to look at his favorite view. To the right, some 200 or more yards away, he could look down and see the Dorman cottage, the small barn and chicken house, the toolshed, smokehouse, the pig enclosure and new feeding trough he had built only last week. From this distance it was a homey sight, the smoke curling upward from the chimney over the wood stove where Carrie was preparing supper for them. He felt good, exuberant, alive. He hoped Jud wouldn't be awake for supper. It ruined his appetite to see his father slopping meat and gravy or soup all over himself, grunting and snorting as he took the food into his gaping maw even as bits and crumbs dropped down his front into his lap or upon the floor. If she had fed Jud already, they might whip through supper, do the dishes, and go into town. He knew Carrie would enjoy the outing as much as he.

Walking along idly, savoring the last rays of the waning sun, he thought that soon he should slaughter old Bob Wire, the razorback, and lay in the winter supply of pork, bacon, and sausage. He'd get Robbie to help him, pay him with generous helpings of the meat for his trouble.

Eastward, from the edge of the Dorman place, ran the smooth, grassy lawns of Radford Hall, all the way up to the very driveways and gardens that surrounded the huge square house of gleaming white, its upper story and part of the huge Doric columns just barely visible from this point. Inside, he could remember, was a storhouse of richness in furniture, rugs, paintings, and thickly brocaded wallpapers. The downstairs ceilings were cypress-beamed and some of the walls were in hand-carved woodwork, others with plaster frescoes and ceiling medallions that looked down on random-width board floors, wood-pegged, shining with years of wear and polish where imported rugs left wide borders to be seen. Two hundred yards of lush meadow lay between the house and thick woods, and in the fading sun this picture of white mansion, flowers, grass, and trees was one Luther would remember, always and often, come to believe it to be a part of his own home because it had been so much a part of his everyday life.

· In the distance the flicker of movement caught his eye momentarily, held it; then it disappeared. He began to walk in the direction

of his own cottage, then saw it again out of the corner of an eye, coming over the slow rise, dipping down into a shallow draw, now no more than 150 yards from where he stood; someone running. He stopped to watch, and when he saw the figure again, there was no mistaking her, even at this distance; it was Miss Bethann, hair flying loosely behind her, running so hard that he became apprehensive and began running toward her instinctively, thinking that one of the dogs might have gone mad and was chasing her.

He leaped the low fence without slowing his surging forward thrust, cleared the top strand of wire easily. She was heading right, toward the woods, and he changed his course to intercept her, to kill or divert the thing that was after her, direct it from her to himself. As he ran, he began to shout, "*Miss Bethann! Miss Bethann! Here! Here! This way!*"

She neither heard nor heeded him and ran on determinedly, skirt pulled up high by the length of her stride. As she reached the edge of the woods, she stumbled and fell to the ground. He groaned as he saw one hand go up into the air and something flew out of it to the ground, a weapon of some sort, he thought. She had fallen in the dirt of the bridle path and he could see the soft earth fly upward in an explosive scattering. He covered the next thirty yards with a burst of speed that only fear or panic can generate.

She lay in a half-daze, moaning quietly to herself, an elbow purple-bruised and the skin scratched and torn, but not seriously. Her face was wet and dirt-smudged, but not cut. Her sweater was pulled upward, showing four or six inches of bare skin, her skirt torn from the bottom hem along the side seam for some fourteen inches, exposing white slip and bare thigh with a purple bruise that ran upward from her knee.

Luther dropped to the ground beside her, took her hand, searched for the weapon, for her pursuer, ready to fend it off. To his surprise, the weapon turned out to be a quart bottle of bourbon, about three-quarters filled. He rose into a half crouch but could see that nothing was following. He stood perplexed and puzzled, then leaned over her closely and smelled her breath, catching the alcoholic flavor of it. The thought that Miss Bethann had been tippling caused him to chuckle for a moment, somewhat with relief that this was no more serious than it was, and then a sudden fear came over him that made him shudder as if the wind had turned cold upon him. If anyone found them here like this, her sweater and skirt pulled up in disarray, he leaning over her like this— Quickly, he pulled down the sweater, tugged her skirt down into place. He picked up the bottle and un-

corked it, raised her up by supporting her back with one arm, put the neck of the bottle to her lips, and tilted it upward. The first drops ran down her chin and neck, inside her sweater; then her mouth opened and she drank the stuff, he permitting only slow passage of the liquid.

She pulled away, gasping, and when she had coughed several times, opened her eyes slowly.

"Miss Bethann," he said, "are you all right?"

Her eyes narrowed, then focused unsteadily on his face. "Luther?" she said.

"That's right, Miss Bethann. It's Luther. Luther Dorman," he repeated. "You all right?"

"Oh. I—I—th—think so, Luther."

He held the bottle for her and she took another pull at it, then pushed his hand away, frowning. "Where—where is he?" she asked.

"Who?"

"My—my father."

"Mr. Marcus? I'n't seen your daddy, Miss Bethann. Just you. Running down from your house like a mad dog or something was chasing after you." Angrily now, "What you running like that for? You could 'most kill yourself doin' a fool thing like that."

She sat up, wavering, catching hold of his sleeve to steady herself. She looked about her, the daze still in her eyes, then back to Luther. "You sure nobody's after me?"

"Nobody at all, Miss Bethann. Why'd anybody be chasing you from your own house, anyway?"

"Oh," she said dully, wearily, "I—I don't know. I don't know." She began to cry, head down, face cupped between her hands, shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

"You—you been drinking, Miss Bethann?" Luther asked hesitantly.

She shook her head as she cried and he couldn't tell whether she meant "yes" she had, or "no" she hadn't. It bothered him to see her crying and he felt a lump in his throat, almost as though he would begin crying himself if she did not stop. He could more easily see anyone else crying. He took her by her arms and held her tightly, trying to rouse her by shaking her gently. "Come on now, Miss Bethann," he said, "this ain't no way for you to act. You're a grown lady and nobody's goin' a hurt you. Stop acting like a child. Come on, Miss Bethann, please don't cry no more."

She shook her head as if to clear it, then drew the back of her hand over her eyes to wipe them. Unconsciously, Luther reached for his towel, then realized that in his haste to get to her, he had thrown

towel and soiled clothes away, must remember to pick them up on the way home. It was darkening fast now and Carrie would be looking for him for supper and he wanted to get Miss Bethann on her feet and turned back toward the safety of the Hall so he could go home.

"Come on, Miss Bethann," he said. "I'll walk you home so's you won't have nothing to be afraid about."

She was standing now, somewhat less than steadily, straightening her skirt, pulling her sweater down and pushing it inside the skirt belt. She turned sharply to him now and said, "Home? No. No, Luther. I'm not going home. I'm never going home again. Not there. Not ever again."

He looked puzzled and alarmed, as though he were dealing with an insane person. "Not going home again ever?" he echoed. "You're talking crazy, Miss Bethann. Your pa, he'll be out of his mind looking for you everywhere in no time at all. What's wrong with you, talking like a little child?"

"Go on home, Luther," Bethann said suddenly with impatient annoyance. "Please. Just go ahead and leave me here; but first—first you've got to promise you won't tell anybody you saw me. I'll be all right. You just go on about what you were doing before you saw me. I can take care of myself."

He stood still, unable to fathom this problem out. "I can't do that, Miss Bethann. I just can't walk away from you and leave you here like this by yourself. It's gettin' on nightfall. Something ever happened to you, I'll get the blame for it. Now why'n't you let me take you home where you'll be fine?"

"Luther," she said firmly, exasperated, "I'm *not* going home. Now please go away and don't try to talk me into going back there."

Luther was trying to decide whether or not he should leave her, then go up to the Hall and tell Marcus Radford that his daughter was out here alone, running around hysterically in the woods. Intuitively, she suspected what was going through his mind.

"Listen to me, Luther," she said quickly, "if you think you're going up to the Hall and tell my father where I am, you'll be making the biggest mistake of your life. If anyone comes looking for me, I'll tear my clothes even worse than they are now and tell them that you tried to attack me and I had to fight you off. I've already got scratches and bruises on me to prove it. Now you go home and leave me alone. And keep quiet about having seen me. You understand?"

Luther thought again that he was going to be in trouble either way. If he went home and did nothing and Mr. Marcus got out a

searching party and found her, she would think he had talked and might carry out her threat; and he had no desire to swing by his neck from the branch of an oak tree.

"Where are you goin'?" he asked. "What are you goin' a do out there all by yourself with night coming on?"

"Luther, will you—?" She halted, her mind going fuzzy, and she shook her head to clear it again. "I'll be all right, Luther, and you don't have to worry. I'll just go and spend the night in my old play-house. I used to go there a lot years ago. You remember it, don't you?"

He flushed guiltily, wondering now if there would be any signs of his most recent dalliance with Cressie. There were two bottles of corn whiskey he had hidden in one of the cabinets for their own use, one bottle about half empty; unless Cressie had been sneaking in and drinking from it without him, or with someone else.

He nodded. "I'll go with you to make sure you're all right. If it's all right, I'll leave you there and won't say nothing to nobody."

She seemed doubtful, shook her head. "No, you go— All right, Luther, come along."

She turned and began walking into the woods. She had taken the bottle from him, clutched it by its neck. Luther followed along, one half-step behind her, ready to grab at her if she stumbled. Already it had grown dark beyond the first of the trees, so thick that the dying daylight could not be seen after fifty yards of penetration. There was no marked path, but she walked ahead unerringly, if erratically, and after a while they came to the small cabin. Inside, there was evidence of disuse, a musty odor hanging over everything. She left the door open to clear out the stale air, found the lamp, shook it; but it was dry. She found a candlestick with three inches of candle in it. "Give me a match, Luther," she said.

He slapped his pockets, remembering that he had given his cigarettes and matches to Carrie before he left the house to go to the creek. "I don't have any, Miss Bethann," he replied.

"All right, then. I don't need any."

She was standing beside him and now her hand touched his arm. He stepped back from her, barely able to see her in the darkness. He felt her reach out and tap the table with her hand, stop when she touched the bottle of bourbon. She picked it up, and for a moment he reached out and tried to take it from her, but she held on to it firmly.

"You oughtn't to be drinking that stuff like that, Miss Bethann," he said.

"No?" He heard her strange laugh. "Right now, Luther, all I want to do is drink this whole damn bottle down and forget I'm alive. I wish there were twice as much so I could drink that much more and maybe fall unconscious and stay that way twice as long. Or even die." She began drinking from the neck of the bottle.

Unaccountably, tears sprang into his eyes, hearing the rash, angry words come tumbling out of her mouth, harshly, unevenly. "Please, Miss Bethann, don't say things like that!"

She lowered the bottle and shoved it toward him. "Here, Luther, take a drink. It's the only thing that makes this dirty, filthy world seem reasonable and—why, *Luther!* Are you *crying*? What ever for?"

He was angry now and the words spilled out of him hotly. "God-damn it, I'n't crying. Not for you or nobody else," he retorted. "You just make me mad as hell, talking like you're some dirty old white trash or something. Talking about wantin' to be dead. Drinking like—like—" The thought of Jud came into his mind, but he could not mention him in the same breath with her. "You—you—"

He heard her bitter laugh. "And you think I'm better than some dirty old white trash, don't you, Luther? You really do believe that. Well, let me tell you how much better your dirty old white trash is than I am. Let me tell you what my father thinks of me, Luther."

Luther said, "I know good and well what your father thinks of you so you can just stop that kind of talk, Miss Bethann. You better—"

She had moved closer to him, the bottle raised upward. "Here, Luther, you take a drink. Go ahead and take a good one and you might be able to stand hearing about the great Mr. Marcus Audrey Radford. Go ahead."

He took the bottle from her, standing there in the near darkness, nervous and uncertain, almost unwillingly and most certainly afraid, yet he felt the compelling desire to identify himself with whatever it was that was tormenting her, become a part of it because it was so much a part of her. She was standing close beside him, so close that he could feel the material of her skirt against him, the softness of her sweater, the perfume of her body mingled with the whiskey fumes of her breath. He raised the bottle and drank deeply from it.

"Wait a minute. J—just hold on, Luther. Don't drink it all."

He lowered the bottle from his lips, feeling the gentle warmth of the bourbon spread out inside him like the heat of burning logs in a fireplace on a cold night. She took the bottle from him and drank again, handed it back to him. He took it from her as she turned away and then he heard her moving toward the far side of the room. He

shook the bottle. There was little more than half of it left. He took a short pull at it, then another. He went to the opposite side of the room where a series of cabinets had been built to hold various toys. He opened one door, inserted a hand and could feel the two bottles inside, took them out and, from the feel, knew that one was nearly empty. Cressie had evidently been here since they had been here together last. He took the full bottle out and pulled the cork, took a sip. This was better. He was more used to the sharp, strong bite of the corn whiskey than the mellow bourbon.

On the far side of the cabin he heard the noise of the bedspring, a familiar protesting squeak, knew that she had sat down on the bed or was lying on it.

"Luther," she called.

"What, Miss Bethann?"

"First of all, stop calling me 'Miss.' Then bring me the bottle, please." Her voice sounded fuzzy and soft, musically drunken as she slurred her words with a slow drawl.

"Where are you?" he asked, stalling.

"Over here. **This** way. That's right. Here, give it to me."

He felt for her hand with his empty one and then put the bottle in it. She was sitting up and he sat down next to her. She leaned forward to drink and her body pressed heavily against him. He put a hand up to steady her and in the darkness he touched one breast and let his hand linger, feeling the soft, resilient mound beneath the warm material of her sweater. She did not seem to notice; if she did, she said nothing to indicate concern, nor did she move away from his touch. He let his hand remain while she drank, and when she put the bottle down, he moved his hand down across her belly, lower, touching the bare flesh of her thigh, then moving it upward again, this time beneath her slip, moving higher until stopped by the tautness of her skirt.

The touch of her inflamed him. She was lying back on the bed now and he could hear her heavy breathing. His free hand reached for the bottle, removed it from her grasp to place it on the floor beside the bed.

"Miss Bethann," he called softly.

There was no answer, only the steady, heavy breathing. She was lying back against the pillow that was propped up against the headboard. "Bethann!" he called again, shaking her lightly.

"Oh. Oh." He heard her voice in the darkness.

"You all right, Bethann?" he whispered.

"'Course. I'm all right." Then, "Car, help me up, please."

He took her outstretched hand and she came up toward him, held onto him as she rose to her feet. He steadied her. "Help me get out of this, Gar," she said.

She had tugged her sweater up, and he put an arm about her bare waist and pulled the garment the rest of the way over her head. She tugged at the skirt and it dropped to the floor. The white half-slip followed. He guided her body back to the bed, let her lay down, then removed her shoes. He pulled the covers up over her, then undressed fully and got into the bed with her.

He heard the soft breathing and thought she was asleep, but when he drew closer to her, the feel of her warmth spread over him. She turned to him with a hunger that amazed, delighted, and frightened him all at once, but he could no longer stay his own hunger. Miss Bethann Radford and Luther Dorman, Jud Dorman's son. It didn't seem possible, logical, or reasonable, but at this point he was beyond reason or logic. Locked in passion, there was little time for thought of anything other than the act at hand. She was strong, almost violent, and he found himself exerting all the strength of his work-hardened body to match the unfettered force in her.

When it was over, she turned and continued to clutch him as she sobbed and twisted from side to side, murmuring brokenly, "I thought I'd lost you. Oh, Gar, Gar, I thought you were gone forever and I wanted to die, too."

If Luther could distinguish her words at all, he gave no sign of it.

Even as he lay beside her sleepless, listening to her breathing and the pounding of his own heart, his hand ran smoothly over her nakedness, touching her thigh, a breast. He thrust his own body closer to her. The urge to take her again was almost overpowering and he held her to himself tightly, hoping she would waken and feel this same need for him. But she slept on, completely unconscious.

It came upon him that she had permitted him this ultimate of all intimacies only because she was drunk and he wondered if it would have made any difference if he were someone else. Anyone else. The thought angered him and for a moment he toyed with the idea of getting up, getting dressed, and going home to his own bed. But she was warm to the touch, her flesh so smooth to feel, and he told himself he could not leave her here alone and unprotected in the woods.

He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but it would not come to him and so he lay quietly, his body pressed close to her, arms about

her as she slept with her back to him. How long they lay in this position he did not know, and then he was aware that she had spoken, perhaps in her sleep.

"Bethann," he said softly.

She did not answer. He turned her body toward him and now she slept facing him, her arms curled upward around his neck, her form impressing itself into his, and he knew that sleep would be impossible. Slowly, easily, he took her again and she played out her part of the act as if she were fully awake, crooning small musical, undistinguishable words and sounds, accepting him eagerly, matching his every thrust, then clutching him hard in the final ecstatic surge of release. She lay back again and in a short while her breath returned to normal. Now total exhaustion and weariness overtook Luther and his eyes closed. He slept.

Sometime shortly after dawn, Bethann Radford came awake in her play cabin, head aching as though it were split in two, sore and bruised body stiff, her mind thoroughly bewildered. At first it seemed to her that this was taking place years ago, when she was eleven or twelve years old and Garrett Harwick had not happened to her yet. In the gray dimness she tried to make out the forms in the room, the chest and table and chairs and—

Her hand touched human flesh other than her own and she stiffened in fear, shrinking from it. Someone lay here in this bed with her, between herself and the wall. Garrett, she thought with an electric surge, but then she knew it could not be. She felt her own nakedness in some kind of fearful panic and slowly, sickeningly, it began to come back to her. Quietly, she got out of bed, stood staring at the male form she now remembered with disgust was Luther Dorman and not Garrett Harwick, his head and back flat upon the bed, mouth partly open, broad chest moving up and down slowly with each breath. Deepening and bitter shame flooded her and she put a hand up to her mouth to suppress the involuntary gasp, shuddering with restraint. How could she possibly have been a party to such odious debasement? How could she?

Her bare feet touched the softness of her clothes that lay upon the floor beside the bed. She shivered in the cold early morning, bent over and drew the sweater over her head, the slip and skirt up over her naked loins. Hot tears of self-pity filled her eyes as full realization of what must have happened here between them came back to her. She fumbled into the flat-heeled shoes, tiptoed out of the cabin, then ran to a safe distance before she stopped to lean

against a tree to catch her breath. It was then that the pounding sickness in her head and the churning turmoil in her stomach overcame her, caused her to retch violently; and then she was throwing up a vile-tasting alcoholic mess.

Much later that morning, when Luther woke up, she was gone. In the dimness of the daylight that struggled through the branches and leaves to filter a fraction of its light through the cabin window, he could see the bourbon bottle sitting on the floor beside the bed, less than half an inch of the liquor left in it. The bottle of colorless corn whiskey stood on the table. He awoke slowly, the taste in his mouth like the ashes of a long-dead fire. He got up, found his clothes on the floor, and began to draw them on. Other than the bourbon bottle there was no sign of Bethann. He went to the door and stepped outside, looked up to see the tiny stray shafts of light glinting downward through the trees, filtered into gray, mottled shadows as they reached him. The woods were quiet, without the familiar, customary noises, almost soundless until he stepped out on the carpet of brown pine needles. A small, soft wind probed playfully, searchingly, through the woods, and it nudged him fully awake.

He walked out of the woods slowly, came to the point where he had found Miss Bethann, then retraced his way back to where he had leaped the fence the day before, found the towel and soiled garments he had dropped. Slowly, dully, he began walking toward the Dorman house, wondering what he would tell Carrie when she asked where he had been since he left her to go to the creek (he judged the hour to be near noon now) some sixteen or eighteen hours before. He was glad he had not asked Carrie about going into town before he went to the creek; it would be bad enough as it was, having to explain. Explain? How could he explain anything about what had happened? It was just too—*crazy*—for anyone to believe, even if he could bring himself to tell anyone. Particularly Carrie.

He saw the smoke, a mere twisting whip, rising from the chimney and knew she would be there waiting for him. Sunday morning. She wouldn't be going to church. She never went to church any more. No, she would be there, sitting in the kitchen, he knew, angry, worried, and waiting for him to come home and explain what had happened to him. The taste in his mouth was bitter, harshly metallic; and then, suddenly, he didn't want to walk inside that house and face Carrie, or even Jud, who would probably be

well under the influence of his whiskey jug by now. He couldn't face her with this rancid whiskey odor on his breath, give her cause to wonder if he were well on the road to becoming another Jud Dorman.

He turned and walked back to the creek and sat with his back against an oak tree, staring into the clear, cold water, thinking again about Miss Bethann, feeling an urgency to be with her, wondering how it would be between them from now on, how they could meet without Mr. Marcus being aware that they were doing so; and how wonderful it was to be back with her, the girl who had shared so many of his dreams, now in this intimate relationship. He tried to think how it would be between himself and Mr. Marcus if she were to break the news to him that she and Luther were going to get married. They would have to now, even if they eloped and then came back and broke the news to him. Would Carrie ever be surprised! Oh, hell, he thought then, I'm just a daydreamin' damn fool; it won't be that way. It can't be. He tried to shift his thoughts to Carrie again, and then Carrie's face faded out in favor of Bethann.

He sat at the edge of the creek for several hours, wanting a cigarette badly, unable to bring himself to go back to the house to get one. He still had no answer for the questions he knew Carrie would throw at him; and he hated to think of how hurt she would be when he refused to answer her. A chilling wind came up suddenly and he rose, knowing he was only delaying the inevitable, causing Carrie to worry all the more, that he would have to face up to her sooner or later. He began the slow walk home again. This time he did not stop. He came into the yard, knowing that Carrie would have fed the chickens, gathered the eggs, slopped Bob Wire, the brood sow, and the pigs. He stepped softly as he mounted the back porch, dropped the bundle of clothes and towel on the bench outside the kitchen door, took a deep breath, and turned the knob and went inside.

Carrie sat at the kitchen table, hands clasped before her, head down. When she heard the door close and his footsteps on the kitchen linoleum, she looked up, red-rimmed eyes staring at him in bewilderment or fear such as he had never seen in her before. Had she—? Did she know already from Miss Bethann—or Mr. Marcus—what had passed between them last night? It couldn't be that so soon. He looked again and saw now that she had been staring at the small radio on the table before her. He could hear

the excited babble of voices coming through its small speaker, turned down low so the noise of it would not awaken Jud, who was evidently asleep in his room.

"*Luther!*" she exclaimed. "Oh, *Luther!* Where in heaven's name've you been since yesterday suppertime? Where've you been, Luther? I thought you were killed out there!"

She rose and came to him, arms gripping him tightly, her face tear-streaked. Luther said, "Killed? What are you talking about, Carrie? What's happened to you, for God's sake?"

She was weeping openly, unashamedly. "Oh, Luther! I thought sure you were dead. Luther, the *Japs!* *Those Japs!* They're *bombing* us! They're right here, over in Pearl County somewhere, dropping bombs on people. *Listen!*"

He sat down at the table and listened, Carrie's hands clutching at him, then at each other nervously. "It's been going on ever since I turned it on," she said, and he motioned to her to keep quiet so he could hear. The terse, machine-gun sentences were bringing first-hand reports and the news was electrifying. Voices interrupted, cutting across the air and each other, pounding, hammering, urgent, *Urgent*, *URGENT!* Gone now was Bethann Radford, gone was Dale Hagen, Johnny Norris, his job, everything else, as he listened tensely, unaware of Carrie's crying in his ear. He was trying to figure out how the Japanese could have gotten to Pearl County, less than a hundred miles from Regis. And then it came to him that this was not Pearl *County* but Pearl *Harbor* they were talking about. Pearl Harbor in Honolulu. He explained this to Carrie, but in her present state of mind it didn't seem to matter much. Then it began to seep into her mind that what was happening was happening a long, long way off, and for the moment, at least, they were safe. She clutched at him, kissed him, held him tightly, then went to the sink to wash her face, brush her hair back into some order.

She was calmer when she came back to the table and sat beside him as he tried to listen, remembering other things now as she asked, "Where were you? Walking out of here yesterday to go to the creek and not coming back until just now. I was up all last night without a wink of sleep, worrying, thinking you'd drowned. I took a lantern up there and searched all over the creek for you. Where were you all last night and today, Luther?"

He said excitedly, "Listen, Carrie. Where I was, what I did, it ain't nothing as big or as important as what's happening here, what's going to happen to us by tomorrow. You know what this means, Carrie? The United States is at war with the Japanese! *We're*

in a war! We all of us've got to get in there and go fight 'em, else they'll by God sure *be* in Pearl County next thing you know. You know what, Carrie?" The excitement in him mounted, showing in his high-pitched voice. "Come tomorrow morning, I'm goin' into town and enlist in the Army. I'n' goin' a wait for the draft to catch up to me. I'm goin', Carrie. First thing in the morning, I'm goin' and I'n' fooling! I'm sure by God goin'!"

The tears came back into Carrie's eyes. "You're not going to wait till they draft you? You're going to leave me alone? With *him*?"

"You weren't ever afraid to be alone with him before, were you, Carrie?"

"I know, I know. But you were never gone before, either. Oh, Luther!" she wailed. "I don't want you to go. I want you to stay here with me. I *need* you! You'll get killed! I—I—"

"Carrie," he said, gripping her arms to steady her, "*listen!* I *got* to go. This ain't a thing you want to do or don't want to do. It's somethin' you *got* to do. No use puttin' somethin' off what's got to be done sooner or later anyway. If I don't enlist, they're sure by God goin' a call me up real soon, so I might as well go to them before they come lookin' for me. And don't you worry about *him*. If I was you, I'd go up and ask Mr. Marcus could you sleep up at the Hall and work and let him—" he jerked his finger toward Jud's room—"go take care of his no-good, worthless self."

5.

Late on that Sunday, December 7, Bethann was awakened by the tantalizing aroma of fresh coffee, brought to her in a silver pot by Lolly, who was one of Sudie's innumerable "nieces" who would be given the treat of spending an occasional Sunday at the Hall, to "hep" out. Lolly was a pleasant, obedient youngster of ten who would undoubtedly have ignored anyone who might call her by her true, legal name, which was Lavalier. She did not touch Bethann to waken her, nor did she speak; she simply stood about three feet away from the bed, then began inching closer to the sleeping figure until it was in a direct line with the flow of steam from the spout of the pot.

Bethann's nose twitched at the fragrance and her eyes opened slowly, frowning. She smiled faintly at the sight of the crisply starched, twin-plaited, smiling little girl, and suddenly the pain of memory returned. "Go away, Lolly," she said, turning her back to the young Negress.

Instead of leaving, Lolly put the tray down on the night table

and began pouring the coffee into a delicate bone china cup. "Aunt Sue-ie, she say for me not to leave it, Miss Bethann. She say to make you drink it 'fore I can come downstairs again."

Bethann lay still, hoping Lolly would leave, but when she turned back a moment later, the girl was sitting quietly on the floor, cross-legged, waiting with resigned patience. Bethann took the cup from the tray and sipped it. "You can go downstairs and tell Sudie I'm drinking the coffee," she said.

Lolly remained seated, hands clasped in her lap, unmoved as she thought this last statement over. Then she said, "No'm, Miss Bethann, I can't. Aunt Sue-ie, she knows every time I don't tell the truth. She said, 'drink it,' not 'be drinking *at* it.'"

Bethann swallowed the rest of the coffee hastily, turned the cup over to show Lolly that it was empty. Lolly flashed a bright, toothy grin of approval, got off the floor, and picked up the tray. "Aunt Sue-ie, she say to ask you if you coming down for your supper. Or do you want it brang up here—?"

Instinctively, Bethann corrected her. "Brought, Lolly."

"Yes'm. Brought up here to you."

The thought of food brought a queasy feeling to Bethann's stomach. "You tell Sudie I'll ring for it if I want it and not to disturb me again until I do." She lay back on the pillow, facing the window.

"Yes'm," Lolly replied and started toward the door. As she reached for the knob, the door opened inward and she found her passage blocked by Marcus Radford.

"Scuse me, Mist' Ra'ford," Lolly said stepping aside. Bethann heard her father's name and burrowed her head deeper into the pillow, her face not visible to him. She heard the door close and knew that Marcus was standing beside her bed.

"Bethann," he said softly.

"Bethann, honey," he said again and waited. An involuntary sob escaped her, a small moan of anguish. She felt his hand on her shoulder in a gentle, caressing gesture.

"Go away," she pleaded from the depth of her pillow. "Please go away and leave me alone."

"Bethann, honey," he said, "we've got to talk this thing out. If we don't, we'll be building a stone wall between us. You and I, we're too important to each other to be building barriers we can't see over or feel or speak through."

There was no reply from Bethann. Marcus stood silent for a few moments, feeling the frustration of her refusal to speak to him. He turned away from the bed, made a motion to return to her, then shrugged helplessly and went out of the room.

Bethann got up, went to the door, and turned the key in the lock. She went back and sat on the edge of her bed and the revulsion and shame of the night before overcame her, the thought that she had permitted Luther Dorman access to her—refusing to give herself the benefit of drunkenness as an excuse for her inexplicable behavior. Inwardly, chemical processes were at work and she became nauseated and ran quickly into the bathroom and threw up. The action brought with it a feeling of complete weakness and this, combined with self-pity and anger, sent the tears gushing down her cheeks. She wet a washcloth, wiped her face until she stopped crying, then went back to her bed, hoping for sleep; and with sleep came temporary release from her thoughts, from herself.

Sudie was at the door, pounding on it, threatening to "bre'k it down if'n you don' come out an' eat somepin' an' stop this heah foolishment." But Bethann refused to speak or permit her to enter. She went back to the bathroom and found the bottle of pink sleeping capsules, swallowed two hastily, and was soon asleep again.

In the middle of the night she woke again, restless, her mind fogged. She paced the floor with wavering steps, found herself unable to coordinate her clouded thoughts, not even to relate incidents with time, which day—or night—this was, or when she had eaten last. The cramped feeling in her stomach told her she was in need of food. She unlocked the door and slipped quietly down the stairs to the kitchen and put a pot of coffee on. The kitchen clock said 3:20. She cast about looking for the newspapers, found the thick pile of a special extra edition of the *Herald* in Marcus's study, and carried these to the kitchen. It was only then that she learned that the war had begun. Somewhere on the inside pages was the story of Garrett Harwick's grisly murder "at the hands of a person or persons unknown, Sheriff Willis Bartly stated to the press."

The coffee began bubbling noisily in the percolator and she filled her cup and sat listlessly at the table trying to read the details of the story, but the words became blurred. She turned back to the pictures of the carnage at Pearl Harbor that had been wire-photoed to the mainland. She shivered in the early-morning cold and drew her robe around her tightly. Then she heard Marcus's voice behind her, and the suddenness of it so startled her that the cup fell from her hand into the saucer with a loud, rattling sound.

"I'm sorry, Bethann," Marcus said, taking the cup and saucer from her and walking to the sink, "I didn't mean to startle you. Sit still and let me get you another cup."

She sat in frozen, tightened silence. Only her eyes, riveted on the white-enameled table, showed the grimness of her feelings for him. He returned to the table with two cups and the coffeepot, poured fresh for them.

He said, "Bethann, honey, believe me, I'm sorry about this whole unfortunate thing. I don't know what I can say—"

"Say? What can you say that will bring him back to life?" Bethann said in a strangely harsh tone.

Marcus's frayed nerves showed in his next question. "Why should I say anything at all? It was you who got yourself mixed up in a cheap, shoddy affair, wasn't it?"

She flashed back angrily, "It wasn't cheap or shoddy until you touched it. You made it that way, not I."

"Are you still accusing me of having done this thing to Harwick?" he demanded.

"I didn't accuse you of doing it with your own hands, no. But will you swear to me that you were in no way, *directly or indirectly*, connected with Garrett's—murder?"

"Now look here, Bethann—" Marcus began.

"Father," she responded coldly, "it only needs a simple 'yes' or 'no' without any painful explanations. Were you or weren't you? Yes or no? It's that simple."

Marcus's face showed anger again. "No, by God, it's *not* that simple," he snapped. "Nothing on the face of this complex earth is as simple as you're trying to make—"

She stood up wearily. "Never mind the barbershop philosophy, Father. You needn't say any more. You've answered the question already."

Marcus covered the distance between them with two steps, put his hands on her shoulders, and forced her back down into her chair. He looked down on her and said, "Bethann, please, you've got to listen to me: I'm sorry—"

She turned her tear-filled eyes up toward him, the mark of bitterness still upon her. "For whom, Father? Me? Because I'll be the mother of a fatherless, nameless child?"

She began to get up, but Marcus held her in the chair with his hands pressing against her shoulders. "Bethann, it doesn't have to be like that. Something can be done. I can—"

"Abortion," she said. "Of course. That would be the easy way out for you. But I won't let you off that easy. I'm going to have this baby and all you have to remember from now on is that my nameless child will be your grandchild whether you like it or not." She

saw the hurt in him now as his arms dropped away from her, and she got up and went out of the kitchen and up the stairs to her room.

6.

In the morning Luther got up as he usually did, went out and took care of his normal chores, fed Hoot and Holler. His mind roiled with the events of Saturday night and Bethann Radford: in instinctive fear of Mr. Marcus's reaction when he would learn of his despicable act; the attack on Pearl Harbor that would, as the man on the radio had said, no doubt plunge the United States into war with Japan, probably Germany as well, no later than today.

He was late finishing his chores and wondered if his leaving so abruptly might make some change in Jud, sober him up enough to take over these duties; but then he doubted that Jud could do so even if he wanted to. The place would just have to make do as best it could—the chickens and pigs sold off and the rest of it forgotten until he came back. Unless Carrie could somehow, in some way—He thought of Robbie Tilebin, then realized that with the war already at hand, Robbie would have to go sooner or later, married or not, children or no, so he couldn't count on Robbie. It would have to work out some way. Nothing could stop him now. He was going. This morning.

When he had finished feeding Hoot and Holler, he came up on the back porch and changed from work boots to shoes, then went into the kitchen to wash up at the sink. Carrie had set a place for him at the table and began to fry the thick slices of bacon. Silently, he carried the coffeepot to the table, poured two cups for them, sat down, and switched the radio on. Voices were again crackling as a well-known radio newsman asked questions of various congressional leaders.

"—and now, Senator," he began a new question, but the Senator interrupted with, "I'm sorry, but we must go inside now. Word has just reached us that the President is on his way to address the Congress."

Luther and Carrie were silent as the other commentaries and news flashes crackled with electrifying sharpness. Through it all, Jud remained in his room asleep.

Luther said, "You're late for work, Carrie."

"It won't make any difference today," Carrie replied dully. "The war's going on up at the Hall the same as it is down here."

Then they heard the firm, solemn words, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States."

Luther and Carrie stopped eating to listen. The words came across strongly, crisply, clearly in the President's bold, familiar voice.

"Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a day which will live in infamy, the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan."

The indictment of cold-blooded treachery and aggression was, in fact, short, but the incisive tone of its delivery made it seem hours long. Now he was concluding his message: "*—with confidence in our armed forces—with the unbounded determination of our people—we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God. I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.*"

It was over then. The war was now, or soon would be, a written as well as a physical fact.

Luther picked up the half-finished cup of coffee, but it was cold and Carrie went to the stove to bring more hot coffee for them.

"I better get goin'," Luther said quietly.

"You got anything special you want to take along with you?" she asked with an air of sober resignation.

"No, Car, I don't guess so," Luther replied. "Just what's on my back. From now on Uncle Sam is going to be taking care of things like what I'm wearing, meals, and a little spending money besides."

"I'll keep all your things and clothes for you," Carrie said.

"Thanks, honey," he replied. "You be sure to do that because I'm coming back as soon as this thing is over. It won't last long." He finished his coffee and cigarette and got up to leave. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out sixty-three dollars, pushed them toward her, but Carrie stepped back, refusing. "You'll more than likely need it a lot more than I will. You keep it," she said. He dropped two twenty-dollar bills and a ten on the table, put the remaining thirteen dollars back in his pocket. She began to cry softly and he took her in his arms and kissed her. "Carrie," he said, "I promise you I'll take care of myself and come back home safe and sound. And when I do, things are going to be a whole lot different around here with us. I know it. I'll get me a job, a good one, the kind you won't have to be worried or ashamed over, and I'll work hard and take good care of you. Like you always done for me. I swear it, Carrie. Only, don't you worry about me."

"Just take care of yourself, Luther, and remember that I'll be waiting right here for you to come back."

"I'll remember, Car. Soon's I'm in, I'll make out an allotment to you out of my pay. You get it, spend it on yourself. And keep in mind what I said about when I get home. You remember it when he gets too drunk and nasty-talkin', you hear?"

"I'll remember, Luther. Just you make sure you come home as quick as you can."

"Sure. You know I will, Car. Just as soon as I clean up my share of them Japs," he replied with a smile he did not feel deep down in his heart.

7.

Sheriff Willis Bartly came into Marcus Radford's office at the Regis National Bank, his face glum with concern, knowing that Hessie Loomis had gone too far this time. Goddamn him, Bartly thought angrily, wasn't for that—that *need*—in him to do harm, to kill, he'd be the best deputy a man could have. It was all right as long as they were niggers he went after, but now, goddamn him, he's got me up the crick with the paddle in Marcus Radford's hand and my bare ass hangin' out.

I knowed it'd come to somethin' like this someday, I purely knowed it would. Wish I had some way to keep him, but Marcus'll sure by God want his scalp peeled right down to the bare bone this time. Damn ornery Texas bastard!

He waited beside Miss Marshall's desk as she went into Marcus's office to tell him that his visitor was here. Bartly kept the large, battered brief case gripped in his left hand, hoping the collections inside, swollen beyond any previous amount, would in some way soften the banker's wrath; then realizing with dull finality that money was probably the last thing that could soften Marcus.

Miss Marshall returned and nodded him toward the paneled oak door. Inside, Marcus Radford sat at his desk, glowering at the sheriff as he entered and closed the door behind him. "Mornin', Marcus," Bartly greeted with a half-smile of doubt.

"Loomis, your high and mighty deputy—" Marcus began.

"Now, Marc, you got to understan' somethin'. Hessie, he's a good deputy. Mighty good. Don' come no better'n him."

"Then tell me this: after I ordered him to drop the matter and forget it, why did he go down there and—?"

"Marc, that's a question. Hessie tellen me he went on down there to make sure the man didn't run off. Just to give that teacher fella

a little piece of advice to stick around. But that fella, damn if he didn' go after Hessie with a thick stick a firewood. Hit him three-four times before Hessie could even c'llect hisself. Knocked him down an' went after Hessie's gun, but Hessie snatched it outen his hand and—well, then it just went off while they was wrastlin' for it. Now, by God, you can't blame a man for defendin' hisself, can you?"

Radford stared at Bartly with disbelieving eyes. "I don't believe a damned word of it, Will, so spare me your trumped-up excuses. Your man Loomis is a cold, brutal murderer and I'm going to have his hide. I'll see him in prison for the rest of his life!"

Bartly squirmed uneasily. "It ain't goin' a be that easy, Marc. No, sir. First off, he opens his mouth, he's goin' a involve your—your daughter—an' you sure by God don't want nothin' like that. Secondly—" Bartly tapped the brief case that he had now lifted to desk-top height—"he's the most reliable collector an' investigator I ever had workin' for me. Nobody's ever been behind in their—ah—party contributions—since Hessie come on the job. Now supposin' he goes shootin' off his mouth, we might have us more trouble than if he stays on. Up in Chancellor there's people with no more'n suspicions now that would purely like to have *proof* of what's goin' on down here." Bartly's head shook sadly from side to side. "I'd hate to lose that boy, Marc. I purely would."

Radford watched Bartly coldly, the air between them heavy with unspoken words. The sheriff fumbled with the straps of the brief case, unbuckled them, reached inside and pulled out a sheet of paper, handed it to Marcus.

"Here's the collection list up to the fifth of the month. Better'n last month an' gettin' better every month since them Army camps begun operatin' at full blast an' new men comin' in every day. Here's the—"

"I'll look it over at home," Radford snapped. "Close it up." Bartly put the sheet of paper back with the bundled currency, brought it around to Marcus's side of the desk, and put it down at his feet. He went to the closet and took out a brief case that was almost identical in every way to the one he'd brought in. He would leave with this one so that no one who might have observed him come in with a brief case could say he had left without it.

"Marc."

No answer from Radford.

"Marc, if I fire Hessie, somethin' bad could happen to the whole setup. I ain't sayin' he'd do it, but he *could* go up to the Federal Building in Chancellor an' lay what he knows in front of the Treas-

ury Department revenueurs who been dyin' for years to get a lead on what we been coverin' up down here. Also, there's Internal Revenue that'd like to get in on it for their share. Remember now, I ain't sayin' that's what Hessie would do, but it's just possible. Marc, listen. What's done's been done an' it can't be undone. I promise you it won't happen again."

"How many times does a thing like this have to happen, Will?"

"Marc," Bartly pleaded desperately, "I give you my own personal word. It won't happen again. Nor nothin' like it."

"And if it does?"

"Then I'll make you another promise, Marc. If it does, an' you give me the word, I swear to God I'll kill Hessie Loomis myself. There ain't no other way to get rid of him. We can't let him go alive. I need him, Marc, but if he's got to go, I'll take care of it so's none of us have to worry that he'll be around to talk to anybody. Ever."

Radford swung around in his chair, still averting his glance so that he would not have to look directly into the sheriff's eyes. "All right. All right, Will. As you said, it's too late to rectify what has been done. You keep him, Will, but I'm warning you—keep him out of my sight. And if I hear of anything more like this, whether it be to a white person or black, he'll not be the only one to go, because you'll go with him and, by God, you'll never wear a badge in this state again. Not even to issue dog licenses. You understand me, Will?"

"Sure. Sure, Marc. I'll keep him close on the end of my leash. He won't stray none, I'll guarantee you." Bartly picked up the empty brief case, went to the door, and opened it. "Thanks, Marc," he said. "I appreciate this a lot. I purely do."

8.

Despite the humming, bustling activity of a nation thrust so dramatically and brutally into war with Japan, Germany, and Italy, and the shopping anxiety and preparations to provide an extra-special Christmas for many who would be going off to those wars within a few short weeks, there was a respectable turnout at Carroll's Funeral Parlor that Wednesday. Young high school students mingled with Garrett's personal friends and acquaintances and the curious, drawn by the extraordinary circumstances and mystery surrounding his death—the unsolved murder of a white man. They filed past the open coffin and peered down at the dead face, cheeks tinted in an unnatural flesh tone that did not quite match the marble hue of his forehead, neck, and hands. To those who had known

Garrett, it was like viewing a badly colored picture of him.

Bethann arrived early and sat quietly in a chair at the back of the dimly lighted room, looking toward the bank of flowers that flanked the coffin. A dozen or more people occupied seats, sitting singly or in twos, whispering among themselves. She recognized Grace Constance, Lucia Davis, saw other familiar faces, but beyond speaking softly to her, none had made an effort to sit with her.

A side door opened and two men came into the room speaking in whispers. One of the men, she knew, was Walter Carroll, owner of the funeral parlor. The other man had his back to her. Carroll walked back into the side room. The other man walked to the back of the auditorium and came around to the middle aisle, and then she was conscious that he was standing beside her.

"Bethann?"

She looked up from her deep thoughts into the drawn, but familiar, face of Ross Markland, and for a moment she was startled.

"Ross," she said simply.

"Do you mind if I sit with you?"

"Of course not."

He sat beside her, and she thought that it was strange that the presence of death should create such an odd and unnatural formality between two old friends. After a few moments Ross said, "He told me that you and he were going to be married the moment he heard his book had been accepted."

"He told you—"

"We were very close, Beth."

"I know how he felt toward you, Ross."

"He made a will. Did you know that, too?"

"He didn't say anything about it to me."

"He did it some months ago. Our family lawyer, Sam Dubois, made it up for him. He gave me a copy to keep. I'll give it to you when everything—settles—down."

"Why me?"

"Because you are his sole beneficiary. He left all copyrights, monies, and income from 'Cause Without Hope,' his entire estate, to you. He thought it best in case war broke out and he got into it."

She put the tiny handkerchief to her eyes. "Thank you, Ross," she said. "I'll do something—with—it. Maybe a memorial in books for the library—or—or—something."

"Don't talk about it now, Beth, honey. Later."

They sat quietly for a while, and then it was time to leave and they rode together in the long, black limousine to the churchyard

cemetery nearby, standing together and hearing the few words of prayer spoken over him by the minister, heard by the semicircle of faculty members, Bethann, and Ross; the now-closed coffin rested on wide canvas bands under the leaden sky, the dead, brittle grass around the raw red earth seeming to break under their feet. And then the short service was over and the coffin was being lowered into the ground. She felt Ross's steadying arm about her and a shiver ran through her. The people were turning away to leave the cemetery and Ross guided her away as she heard the first shovelful of dirt rattling obscenely against the lid of the coffin lying in the gaping, rectangular hole. A stifled sob escaped her as Ross helped her into the limousine, got in after her.

"Did you drive your car?" he asked.

She nodded.

"When we get back to Carroll's, I'm going over to Garrett's place. I dropped a man off there to pack his books and things. Most of them are for you. I'm to take a few books. Would you want to come with me?"

She hesitated. "Don't come if you'll be upset by it," he said.

She shook her head. "I won't be upset. I want to go."

The air was chilled, the day raw and sunless, the woods more crisp than she could remember them as they pulled into the familiar parking place beside the familiar Ford that had belonged to Garrett. They got out of her car, the larger Cadillac, and went down the path to the cottage. A lanky Negro boy sat on the front porch, and as they came up he rose to his feet slowly, touched a finger to the battered gray felt hat on his head. "Ev'rything packed or tied up, Mist' Ross," he said. "You want me to haul it somewheres for you?"

"Where is it?" Ross asked.

The Negro pointed up the pathway. "I done carry it up an' packed it inside that ol' Foard a his'n."

"All right, Josh, you just run it out to the house and leave it in the garage. Don't unpack it. Leave it in the car as it is."

"Yassuh." The Negro walked up the path slowly and out of their vision. Ross turned to Bethann. "I guess it's about all we can do here," he said. "The man is put away first, then his few earthly possessions." He paused for a moment, looked at Bethann, but she was staring out toward the river. "I'm waiting now to hear from Crate about the book. There's no doubt now that Sherwood & Austin will accept and publish 'Cause Without Hope.' It's only a matter of ironing out a few details before the contract comes through. I suppose you'll have to sign it now."

"Will you look after it for me, Ross? I'll give you a power of attorney."

"If you want it that way."

She began to cry softly, knowing that when she left here, she would be leaving a very important part of herself in this empty cottage. Ross put an arm around her.

"Do you want me to drive you home now?" he asked.

She shook her head, dried her eyes, and said, "Ross, I need your help."

"I'll be glad to help you in any way I can, Bethann, you know that, but what about—?"

"My father?"

Ross nodded.

"Ross, I've got to get away from Regis. From him. I'll need some help to do it."

"Away from—? Beth, are you—?"

"Ross, I know what I'm saying, what I'm doing. Marcus knew about it—about Gar's death. Or murder. In some way he knew about it, that it was going to happen. I know it, Ross, *I know it.*"

The words were tumbling out of her mouth in short, almost incoherent bursts. She saw the pure disbelief in his eyes. "I know what I'm saying, Ross. You've got to believe me. I'm not just being hysterical."

"You're not accusing your father of Garrett's murder, are you, Beth?"

"I didn't say that, Ross. But he knew. I'm sure he knew before it happened that it was going to happen. And that he could have prevented it."

"I can't believe it, Beth. Why? For God's sake, why would Marcus Radford do a thing like that? Know of a murder that was going to take place and not—do—anything—about—it." He continued to stare at her, his eyes opened wide in surprise. "Beth, do you—?"

"Ross, listen to me," she said, gripping his arm tightly. "You listen."

Slowly, unashamedly, she told Ross Markland the entire story, how she and Garrett had had their affair, how she learned she was pregnant, told Marcus about it with the naïve belief that he would understand, be forgiving, might even give his blessing to them. How, when she returned from seeing Garrett, Marcus was gone. She gave him every detail of what had followed between herself and Marcus.

Ross took two cigarettes out of his packet and lighted them, giving her one. She took one puff and dropped hers to the porch

floor, ground it out with her shoe. Tears filled her eyes and she shook her head to drive them out.

At the point in her story where she had run away from the house and met Luther Dorman accidentally at the edge of the woods, she stopped, unable to bring herself to tell of her wild, unaccountable, and shameful act that now was without sense or reason or understanding, one that had happened beyond her own will or knowledge, could not have any possible connection with what had gone before. Her voice came to a stop and Ross sat for several studious moments trying to concentrate, to connect all the pieces of her story into one single, cohesive picture. Much as he fought the idea at first, he felt now that she was right in her assumption that Marcus had, in one way or another, been involved in Garrett's death. Bethann fumbled in her purse, took out her own package of cigarettes, but it was Ross who had to take it from her trembling hands to extract one and light it for her.

"Ross, will you help me?" she asked finally.

"Of course, Beth."

"I just want to get away. I can't even think for myself any more. I hate the very thought of going home again, to see—him—or to be in the same house with him."

"Don't press yourself too hard, Beth. We'll work it out somehow. I promise you."

"I hate him, Ross. I hate him so much!" she declared passionately.

"He's still your father. And a powerful man to deal with. It won't be easy, you know."

"Don't talk to me in that tone, Ross. I know you mean it for the best, but I won't soften. Technically, you're right. But I'm twenty-one years old. Legally, I'm old enough to do what I want as long as I don't break any laws doing it."

"I'm not trying to talk you out of anything you want to do, Beth. I'm on your side all the way. You've got to remember that I was close to Garrett, too."

"Then you've got to help me get away as soon as possible. I've just got to!"

"You won't consider staying on at the Hall? For a while, anyway?"

"You mean until after the baby is born? I couldn't do that, with the whole town making a guessing game of who the baby's father was, can I?"

Ross got up and walked across the porch and stared out over the calm river. "I've got about \$1500—" he began.

"I've got money, Ross. There's almost \$4000 in my personal checking account at the bank."

"Can you draw it out?" he asked. "You'd probably need more than that to take care of you until the baby is born. We can't count much on any early income from the book—"

"I don't think I'll need to touch any of it. I wouldn't want to."

"If you can get most of the \$4000, I'll put my \$1500 to it. Long before that's gone, I'll have put aside more than enough to take care of the rest of your needs. We'll work it out all right, Beth."

She put out a hand and touched his arm. "Money isn't the big problem, Ross. How to get away from Regis without Father knowing where I am is all I need at the moment."

"All right, then. Let's see how we can work it. What time does Marcus get down to the bank generally?"

"He always leaves the house at nine-thirty, sometimes a little later. Seldom before that."

"I think the idea is for you to make the break as early in the morning as you can and probably as quickly as you can. He won't think you're going to make a quick, sudden move. Maybe tomorrow morning would be best. Suppose you go on home now and get some things packed. Not too many. Anything you can sneak out into your car trunk without anyone seeing you. You'll have to leave your little buzzwagon at home and take the Cadillac. Early tomorrow morning you pull up to the bank at just about the moment it opens at nine. Go in just as calmly as you can and draw out all but about a hundred or two hundred dollars. If you can get away with that, he won't know if you went to New York, New Haven, or New Orleans. Let's say he'll be pretty sure to guess you wouldn't go to such an obvious place as New Orleans. I know a good place where you can stay down there. The man who runs the hotel is an old friend of mine. By the time you're safely in hiding, Marcus's trained hound dogs will be out of their wits trying to locate you."

"But won't it be fairly easy with the police looking everywhere for my car?"

"Marcus would never bring the police into it officially. A private detective, maybe. Besides, you're not going to take your car. Here's what we'll do—"

9.

On her return to the Hall, Bethann went up to her room and packed two bags, one large enough to hold several dresses and suits, a smaller one for lingerie, cosmetics, and lesser necessities. She

waited until she heard Newton drive out in the station wagon to do the daily errands. It was three o'clock and Bethann wondered what pretext she could use to keep Sudie and Carrie occupied long enough to get the two bags out of the house and to the Cadillac without being seen.

She came downstairs and heard female voices in Marcus's study through the open doorway. She peeked in. Carrie Dorman stood on a tall stepladder, trying to fit a curtain rod over the two large windows, the newly pressed curtains dangling loosely as Sudie, grumbling her instructions to Carrie, held the ladder at its base.

Now, thought Bethann. She turned quickly and ran up the stairs to her room, brought the two bags down with her, turned into the back hallway toward the kitchen and rear exit.

"You Miss Bethann!" she heard Sudie calling from the study.

"I'll be right back, Sudie," Bethann called without stopping. She went outside to the garage, lifted the trunk and put the two bags inside it, slammed the lid shut. She returned to the study where the same act was being played out between Sudie and Carrie.

"Miss Bethann, you got time to hol' 'is ladder foah Miss Carrie whilst I go back to my kitchen an' look ovah my roast? Jus' foah a few minutes till I come back?"

"Of course, Sudie," Bethann replied, relieving the old Negress of her task. Carrie looked downward from the top step of the ladder and smiled. "I hope you're feeling better, Miss Bethann," she said. "Sudie was telling me you were under the weather."

Bethann returned the smile, happy she had been able to accomplish her important mission without having been detected. "I'm feeling much better, Carrie," she replied. "How—is your father?"

"Pa? Oh, he's the same, I guess." There was a pause as she fit the near end of the curtain pole into position and began to flick the curtain over it, giving an evenness to it. "I don't guess you heard," she went on. "Luther went off and joined the Army first thing Monday morning. They shipped him and another twenty-five or thirty boys from the county off to camp last night."

Bethann heard the words and a sense of heavenly relief came over her. "The—the Army? He wasn't called up, was he?"

"No. He just went on into town and enlisted. He called me last night from camp and told me a lot of men from here were in with him. They couldn't wait to be called. Now the war's really on, they all want to get on with it. Get it over with."

"I suppose so, Carrie. I'm sure—you'll miss him—very much."

"I will for sure, Miss Bethann. He's a good boy. Now there'll be

only me and—and—" She sat down on the top step of the ladder, high above Bethann's head, and Bethann could see she was ready for tears. "I'm sure he'll be all right, Carrie," she said comfortingly. "Don't you begin worrying so soon. Now that we're in it, it won't last too long, you'll see."

"I just don't want anything to happen to Luther, Miss Bethann. He's about all I've got. Not counting—Pa. And he's never in his whole life been away from home, only once or twice just for over-night. I don't know how he's going to take to Army life."

"It might be the best thing that ever happened to him, Carrie. By the time he's finished rubbing elbows with a lot of boys from all over the country he might find out a lot of things he'd never learn working on a patch of ground around Regis."

"If he comes home alive," Carrie said ominously.

"He'll come home alive and fine, Carrie. After all, the Army is going to train him to take care of himself. They won't throw raw men into battle without proper training. The President has said that any number of times. And it's even likely he might not be in a combat group. Don't you worry about it. You just see that he gets enough mail from you. And some nice things to eat once in a while."

Carrie began to adjust the curtain again, happy now that there was someone understanding with whom she could share her concern over Luther. Sudie came back into the study and took over the task of holding the ladder for Carrie.

"I'm going out to run an errand, Sudie. I won't be late for dinner," Bethann said to the housekeeper.

"You be sure you be back on time. Yo' daddy, he call an' say he got a meetin' to go to an' he won't be home fo' his suppuh tonight."

"I'll be home in good time, Sudie," Bethann promised.

Before she went to the garage, she phoned Ross and asked him to meet her at the parking place at the top of the grade at Garrett's cottage. It took another thirty minutes before she got there, found Ross waiting for her. He took the two bags from the Cadillac and put them in the trunk of his car.

"Anybody see you leave?" he asked anxiously.

"No one saw the two bags. I told Sudie I'd be home in time for dinner. I've still got some time left."

"Good. Now listen carefully. Tomorrow morning you get dressed as though you were going into town to do some shopping or to the hospital to your library work as usual. Go directly to the bank and park your car in the lot behind the building. Do everything the way you would normally do it. After you cash the check and get the

money, go out through the front door, walk across the Square and down Pine Street, then to the corner of Almond Drive. I'll be parked there waiting for you."

She saw Ross's car parked where he said it would be and walked toward it slowly. Everything had gone off without even the slightest hitch. At this moment it was only 9:15. Marcus had been asleep when she left, after hurrying Sudie along with her breakfast, listening to the old housekeeper's inevitable mumbling and gentle complaining when her well-ordered life was disrupted for even a few minutes.

"Why you up dis early, scootin' 'roun' like a wukkin' gal, sashayin' int' town foah anybody even got they stores open?" she grumbled.

"Will you *please* hurry, Sudie? I told you I've got to get to the hospital library and get the records up to date. I've stayed out too long and we're far behind in our work because of me."

She had written a note to Lucia, saying that she would be away for an indefinite period and would have to be replaced, suggested Lucia talk with Grace Constance to help her find a replacement. This she would drop in the mailbox in front of the bank after she had withdrawn the money. Once out of the house, the rest was easy. She timed her arrival with the bank's opening at exactly nine o'clock. She made out the counter check for \$3200 and shoved it across the glass plate to Tula Carston, who had already reached for the hundred dollars, assuming that this was what Bethann would want. When she saw the amount of the check, she hesitated, then took the check up in her hands to examine it more closely. "I'll have to get some more cash, Miss Bethann," she explained. "I don't have that much money in my box."

She went to Cass Worden's desk and handed him the check. Cass glanced at it, then looked up for verification to Tula's window, shrugged, and went to the vault. Within three minutes the money had been passed through the cage to Bethann, and she walked out of the bank, dropped the letter to Lucia Davis into the mailbox, crossed the Square to Pine Street.

As she got into Ross's car, his foot was already depressing the starter pedal. He pulled away from the curb easily, drove the dozen blocks to Route 11, and headed southward toward New Orleans. When they arrived just after dusk, he drove to a small, out-of-the-way hotel where he was obviously well known. He spoke with the manager of the hotel at length, and the three went to a clean, airy suite on the second floor. The manager left Ross with Bethann for

a few minutes, went downstairs, and returned with a registration card that she filled out in the name of Margaret Dennis of Daytona Beach, Florida. Ross remained for another half hour until he felt she was fully reassured, then left for the long drive back to Regis.

Early in March of 1942 Bethann sent Ross another of their signals, a picture postal card with an innocuous message, a "New Orleans-is-a-wonderful-town-for-a-soldier-on-liberty" type, signed it with the uninspired name, "Joe." The following morning Ross told his secretary that he was driving to Glenville to visit a furniture plant that had been lax in its shipments, then headed his car in the opposite direction toward New Orleans. Arrived, he sat with Bethann in the coffee shop as he brought her up to date on the news of Regis. She was showing ample signs of her pregnancy now, but her face and eyes sparkled with sheer beauty and Ross marveled that so much additional loveliness could be possible.

"It was almost coincidental, your sending me the card," he told her. "I was getting ready to come down to see how you were getting along."

"I haven't moved out of here hardly at all for fear that someone might be looking for me. Tell me all that's going on at home."

"Well, for one thing, Marcus is just about ready to go out of his mind with anxiety. Still not enough to turn the police loose on you; although he's got newspaper ads running in the personals columns across the country, using initials—"

"I've seen them in the local papers," Bethann said.

"I'm pretty sure he must have a good detective agency on the job. But as long as you keep on as you are, he'll never know where to find you." He hesitated for a moment, then said, "Beth, do you think maybe you've punished him enough?"

"You think I have, don't you, Ross?"

"I guess I'm not the one to say. But I know that in punishing him, you've taken a lot of punishment yourself. This isn't any kind of a way for you to be living—"

She cut across his words. "Ross, you said you were ready to come down to visit me when you got my card. Were you going to come down to plead Father's case for him?"

Her tone was so steady, icily so, that he stared up at her. "Beth, you don't think I've sold you out to him, do you?"

He saw the change in her eyes. "No, Ross," she said, "and I'm sorry if I implied it."

"As a matter of fact, Beth, the reason I want to see you is to tell

you that I hope this thing can resolve itself because I don't think I'll be able to help you much longer."

"Has anything happened, Ross?" she asked, concerned.

"Two things," he said wryly. "First, Della definitely turned me down for Braden Etheridge. They eloped last week when Braden got his orders to report to an Air Corps station somewhere in Texas. Second, I got my own orders last week. I am now Ensign Ross Markland, boy sailor."

"Oh, Ross, I'm so sorry about Della."

He shrugged. "To the victor," he said lightly, but his voice and the heaviness that hung over him belied the faint smile on his face. "Let's figure out what's going to happen to you down here when I leave. I've got twelve days left before I report for duty. How is your money holding out?"

"Fairly well. I haven't spent much besides my hotel bill here and some clothes to hide my blossoming figure. Ross, you've your own problems to worry over now and I can't let you take mine on with them."

"What I'd like to do, if you'll let me, is transfer a couple of thousand dollars to you so that you won't have to worry about running short."

Bethann refused. "No, Ross. You've done more than enough for me already. And perhaps you're right. It might be time to let my father know where I am."

"You going to write and tell him where you are?" Ross asked.

"Not that easy. I'll let him find me in another way. That is, if you'll help me make it clear to the manager."

"How?"

"I'll make out a check for \$500 and sign it with my real name. The manager can put it through his bank, and when it clears Regis without protest, he can apply the \$500 to my account and let me draw against it. In that way my father will know I'm in New Orleans."

Ross said, "I hope you know what you're doing, Beth."

"I think so. I've thought about it while I sat around in my little suite dreaming up all kinds of situations. I know he'll send someone down here to keep an eye on me, but I don't think he'd try to kidnap me and take me back against my will."

"You're sure you want to do it this way?"

"I think so, Ross. Even after he finds out where I am, I still won't go back until after the baby is born."

Before he left, Ross talked with the manager and gave him

Bethann's check for \$500 made out to "Cash." Within three days the manager knocked on Bethann's door and handed her the \$500 in cash. In turn, she gave him another check for \$500 and asked him to repeat the process. Now, she reasoned, she would be on the outlook for someone whom Marcus would no doubt send to keep an eye on her every move, report her actions and whereabouts to him. He wouldn't come himself. Not yet. He would honor the overdraft and then play a waiting game, satisfied that he knew where she was and that she was well. That would be sufficient for the moment.

Within a few days she noticed that she was being followed, not by one man, but by several who took turns. She would go out, hail a cab, and find that another was trailing her. She would go to a movie and feel an invisible companion with her, perhaps two rows behind. She led her observers on shopping trips and got into the spirit of the game herself by occasionally backtracking her steps or leaving a store by a side entrance, stepping into an elevator just as the door was closing, using these simple devices to elude her watchdogs. She never let on that she was aware of their presence.

A month went by and she put through a check for \$1000 which cleared Regis without question. The following week, she cashed another \$1000 check. And then one night she paid her bill to the manager and enlisted his help again. At four-thirty the following morning he knocked on her door and told her the way was clear. He took her bags and led her down the back stairs into the alley where he put her into a taxi which drove her to the manager's home, where she waited with his wife. At two the following afternoon the manager's wife and Bethann went to an apartment that had been leased, after much difficulty and with an extravagant bonus and three months of exorbitant rent paid in advance.

10.

In mid-April of 1942 Marcus Radford drove to Riverdale and phoned Tracy Englander's office in Chancellor. He was pressed with his own problems and wanted to avoid the usual groups he would run into if he went to the capital, and so he would ask her to drive the eighteen miles here to Riverdale to meet him. He had done this on other occasions and now, as usual, he gave the name Ernest Fox to the operator at the *Examiner*, learned that Miss Englander was out.

When would she return?

In an hour, perhaps two. Could Miss Englander return the call, or would Mr. Fox care to leave a message?

Only that he had called and would call back in two hours—around four o'clock.

At four, four-thirty, and again at five Marcus called, finding her in on the last try, feeling the coolness in her responses to him.

"You should have let me know you were coming," Tracy said matter-of-factly. "You must know how busy I've been with the paper since Dad died."

For a moment Marcus felt somewhat stunned at her words, then remembered that Tom Englander had died of a heart attack back in mid-December. He had made a mental note to call Tracy at the time, but had become so engrossed in his own problems with Bethann and the Harwick affair; and then somehow the weeks and months had passed and this was his first contact with her since then. "Tracy, I was terribly sorry to hear about Tom," he offered his lame and belated condolence.

"Thank you," she said simply, coolly.

"Tracy, please don't be angry."

"You might have come up at the time, Marc. Or at least phoned or written a note. It's been four months, you know."

"I'm dreadfully sorry, Tracy. When it happened I was desperately involved in a problem of—"

"Of course, Marc," she said affecting an offhanded disinterest. "I know how that can be. I've been terribly busy myself with the reorganization and operation of the paper."

"Tracy, could you please drive over? I want to discuss something very important—"

She cut him short. "I'm sorry, Marc. I've got a heavy schedule and an editorial board meeting tonight at eleven-thirty. I can't miss it because I called it for a special reason."

"I see. Then may I drive over and see you tonight?"

There was hesitation again, and when she spoke next, he could sense a reluctance in her voice as though she were considering his request, but only on the basis of what had gone between them in the past. He grew angry to be put off by her; and then he realized that his anger could be costly only to him, since she didn't seem to care any longer.

"Not until nine-thirty or ten," she said, adding, "and then for only an hour."

Now it was he who hesitated, vexed by her seeming indifference, tempted to hang up and let it go. "Are you still there, Marc?" she asked.

"Yes. Yes. All right, Tracy, I'll meet you at nine-thirty. Where? At the hotel?"

"No, Marc," she replied quickly. "Pick me up in front of the *Examiner* Building. I'll be there at nine-thirty sharp."

While he waited he wondered how it was possible that he had treated her so shabbily, as though she hadn't existed all this time. He parked a few yards beyond the lighted entrance to the newspaper building, and within two minutes she came out and was standing beside the car. He leaned over and opened the door from the inside, and she bent down and slipped in beside him. The meeting was awkward, both acting very much like first acquaintances.

"Hello, Marc," she said without any particular warmth.

"Thank you for coming, Tracy," Marcus replied formally. She glanced upward at him with some curiosity, but he looked ahead and pulled away from the curb, guiding the car out toward the state highway.

"Don't go too far, Marc, please," she said. "I'd like to be back within an hour."

"Of course. I'll park off the road at the next clearing."

They were silent as he found an offside clearing to the right of the road, parked and turned the lights off. He made no move to draw near to her, to hold or kiss her.

"Well, Marc," she asked almost too casually, "how have you been?"

He ignored the question. "Tracy, I'm deeply and truly sorry I was so involved in a personal problem that I forgot about Tom's death, about everything except what was most important to me at the moment."

"You weren't in prison, Marc. A mere phone call or note—"

"Not in the exact sense you mean, Tracy, but I was in a prison of my own making. I was in a hell of a kettle of trouble. Serious trouble. And still am."

Now she turned to him with her forehead wrinkled into a frown. "What kind of trouble are you in, Marc?" she asked in a softer tone.

"The worst possible. It's Bethann." He told her the entire story from beginning to end, how he had learned of her condition, her assurances to him, his call to Bartly, meeting with Loomis, and their conversation.

"And your deputy sheriff, I assume, went to where this young man lived and—took care of him? Just like that?"

Marcus nodded. "I told him I didn't want him to—to—"

"Oh, Marc! How could you have let a thing like that happen? Poor Bethann! Poor girl. I feel so terribly sorry for her." Silence. "I—I feel sorry for you, too, Marc, that you couldn't see or know the monstrous thing you were doing to that poor young man—and your own daughter— Why couldn't you have waited and let it work out?"

"Tracy, for God's sake!" he exploded savagely. "I came here for help and you say this to me?"

"Help? No, Marc, you didn't come to me for help. Not really. You came hoping I would be able to see your side of it and agree with you, to tell you that Bethann was wrong to run off the way she did, that you didn't *really* have anything to do with the killing of her young man—at least, not with your own two hands. For God's sake, Marcus, can't you see that if you hadn't got others involved in it, the boy would still be alive and Bethann married and living at home?"

"Tracy, Tracy," Marcus sobbed.

"I'm sorry, Marc, truly I am. I can't side with you in a thing like this. I only wish that Bethann and I were friends and that she had come to me for comfort instead of running off to God-only-knows-where among strangers."

Marcus cried out in desperation, "Tracy, I need help!"

"More than Bethann needs it? Do you know where she is?"

He nodded. "I found out only recently. She's cashed a few checks in New Orleans. I've had them traced and have men watching her."

"I have you tried to get in touch with her?"

"No. Not the way she feels about me at the moment."

Tracy lit a cigarette, blew at the match, and dropped it out of the window. For a while she sat studying the eddies of smoke that curled upward and swirled out into the night while Marcus sat without moving his clenched hands off the wheel.

"Marc," Tracy said reflectively, "it might well be she cashed those checks for the very purpose of letting you find her. Of course, it can be just as wrong a guess as right, but I have a feeling it might have been done for that reason, either consciously or unconsciously. I can only suggest this: try to see her, and when you do, tell her, just as you told it to me, except that you've got to admit your share in it, that you acted impulsively, in anger, out of deep hurt."

He shuddered involuntarily at the thought. "I can't, Tracy," he whispered hoarsely. "I don't dare admit any part in it."

She turned toward him again. "Marc, for God's sake, *tell her!* Are you so damned great and holy that you can't humble yourself to your own daughter, the one person you think more of than any other

in the world—including me? She already knows you're involved. How she knows, and to what extent, I can't guess, but she does. And until you can admit it to her yourself and beg for her forgiveness, you don't even **have the slightest** prayer of working yourself back into her good graces. It will probably never be the same between you again, but at least you might be able to live in peace together instead of this torment." She studied him solemnly for a moment. "You can't stand that, can you, Marc? Having to ask someone to forgive you, even with the knowledge that you were wrong."

"Was I wrong?" Marcus asked. "*Was I?*"

"Weren't you, Marc? Let me ask you this: if you could go back again to the day it all happened, knowing what has since happened between you and Bethann, would you do the same thing over again exactly as you did it before? Or would you have waited that hour she asked for, then blessed the marriage and their happiness? Think about that before you answer."

In a moment he answered her evasively, the hard, angry, stubborn words clipped off one behind the other: "*I—don't—think—I—was—wrong!*"

"Would you do it all over again in the exact same way you did it before?" she persisted.

Angrily, he snapped, "Yes, by God! I'd do it the same, exact way. *Exactly!* I'm her father and I wanted to protect her. Was that so wrong?"

She heard the hurt and arrogance and anger through his agonizing words and waited for him to add to them, but he said no more, stared grimly at the hands that gripped the steering wheel so tightly. After a moment she looked away from him and exhaled the deep breath she had been holding in her lungs. She said quietly, "Will you please drive me back to the paper now?"

Without another word he reached for the ignition key and started the car. When they pulled up in front of the *Examiner* Building, she got out quickly, saying, "Good-by, Marc."

11.

Four weeks later, Marcus Radford picked up the rich, square, cream-colored envelope from among the others that lay in a pile on his desk at the bank. He picked it up first, noting the Chancellor postmark and date, and slit it open slowly, almost as though he knew what he would find inside it, trying to hold back the inevitable.

It was an announcement of the marriage of Miss Tracy Englander to Mr. Jefferson Loudon Pickett.

He put the announcement to one side and reached for the Regis

Herald, turned the pages idly. The story was on Page 12. Miss Tracy Englander, owner and publisher of the Chancellor *Examiner* and daughter of the late Thomas Graham Englander, had exchanged vows with Mr. Jefferson Loudon Pickett, who had been named managing editor of the *Examiner* at the time of Mr. Englander's death the preceding December.

12.

Late in May of 1942 an accident occurred in which the taxi carrying Bethann was struck a glancing blow by a truck and was sent lurching and skidding across the wet street into a telephone pole. Bethann was propelled forward, and her head struck the top rim of the back of the driver's seat. Within minutes she was rushed to the nearby Presbyterian Hospital where late that night she gave birth to a five-pound-three-ounce daughter, delivered without any visible damage. When she came to in her room, Sudie was sitting near her bed humming the same familiar lullabies she remembered from her earliest childhood, as if the aging Negress were rehearsing for a role she would take on in the near future.

"Sudie!" she exclaimed in a whisper, the happy delight in her voice and eyes. "Where on earth—?"

Sudie was at her side at once. "Sh-h-h, baby, you go on back to sleep. You needs yo' rest, lambie. Sudie, she be here all the while."

Bethann smiled, all fear and uncertainty gone. "How did you get here?" she asked.

"Dat Newton, he druv us down, Mist' Marcus an' me. He gotten a telephome call to come hurry, so 've come. You been a bad chil', you know dat, don't you, hidin' out from Sudie lahk 'at?"

"Father is here with you?"

"Sho. He outside in a room down yonder apiece, a-settin' with Newton."

"Tell him to go home. I won't see him. Tell him I said—"

Sudie arose, alarmed. "A'right, a'right now, baby. Don't you go gittin' yourself all fretted an' fussed now. You ain't goin' a do yo' milk no good thataway, so you jes'—"

The nurse came into the room and frowned, seeing Bethann raised up on one elbow, excited, her voiced pitched high in anger or fear. She motioned Sudie outside. "I will not tolerate any such disturbances to my patient. You get out of here and stay out! The *idea!*" She took the protesting Sudie by the arm and led her into the hallway. "Now don't you dare come in here upsetting Mrs. Harwick, you black fool!"

Sudie glared and mumbled and tried to come back into the room.

When the nurse moved to intercept her again, Bethann protested. "You take your hands off her, nurse. Don't you dare touch her," she ordered, and when the bewildered nurse stood twisting her head from one to the other, the Negress weeping, Bethann lay back calmly and told Sudie to "tell Mr. Radford that I thank him for everything and I don't need anything more. Also, if you stay with me, he needn't."

Marcus drove back to Regis that afternoon.

Sudie and Newton remained in New Orleans, and when Bethann was able, they took her and the baby home to her apartment. The baby was named Harriet, being the first part of Garrett's last name and the last part of his first name. After three weeks Newton caught a bus back to Regis. In July of 1942 Bethann and Sudie returned to Radford Hall, making no secret of the fact that she had brought a baby with her. The help would know, Carrie Dorman would know. Why try to hide it? If it embarrassed Marcus, so much the better. She herself remained away from the public eye. But no amount of effort on Marcus's part would bring her around to speaking to him. The presents he sent and brought for her and the child all remained unopened; and when he came to her room and opened them, they remained untouched. He lurked about the house at odd hours of the morning, afternoon, and evening to catch a glimpse of her, talk to her; and when he spoke, she stared past him, refusing to take even the slightest notice of him.

One night he entered her room as she lay upon her chaise reading and began to make an impassioned plea for her forgiveness and understanding, telling her of his need for a daughter's love, the promises of that which he could, and would, do for her and her daughter. She continued to stare at the blurred words in the book she held, unable to distinguish one from the other; and then finally she got up and walked into her bathroom and locked the door behind her and remained there until she was sure he had gone, suffering another defeat.

Chapter 8

1.

Luther Dorman's military history from December 8, 1941, when he enlisted in the Army of the United States, until the day in March of 1945 when he was sidelined out of active service in a German forest, was little more than the record of one man's wartime travels intermingled with frustrations and futilities.

At the start he was happy to be away from Jud and the drudgery of farm chores. He remembered this phase of his dull, torpid life more than he could remember the fact that he had begun to work for Tam Nariocas and the dreams he had projected out of this job. If he regretted having had to give up this source of income, it was somehow overshadowed by the national excitement of War; also by the knowledge that Dale Hagen, who had easily as much—and more—to give up, was with him here in camp, having enlisted on that same day. Most certainly he was sorry to have left Carrie behind with Jud, to put up with his drunken abuses, unconscious obscenities, and immoderate language—working at the Hall by day to supply their need for cash in the house, cash that went for Jud's whiskey supply, and now for such additional foods that the farm would not be able to produce without him. Above all other considerations, he felt the relief of being out of reach of Marcus Radford, who, if he learned in some way—perhaps even from Miss Bethann herself—about his daughter and her affair with this son of a non-paying drunken tenant, might be angered sufficiently to have him brought home where he could inflict a realistic harm upon him; and Luther had no small doubt in his mind that Mr. Marcus was powerful enough to do just that.

And so, with the other men from Regis and the surrounding towns in the county who had rushed to enlist on that December 8, Luther had been sent to a training camp in the southeastern corner of the state, and he put his mind and back into the problems and tasks that lay before him, the immediate necessity of learning to become a

soldier; and when the long weeks of hard, monotonous training labors were over and the unit declared ready to move on to its next stop, he was as good a soldier as any of the others, and better than most. He felt a quiet pride in having been able to keep up with Dalc, to surpass most of the others who were more than mere casual acquaintances, either well known to him from his schooldays or from that youthful pastime of "just hangin' around" the poolroom, Benson's Drug Store, or one of the two movie houses in town: Henry Luftin, Tobe Sharkey, Gabe Stanley, the Tidwell brothers, immediately nicknamed Mutt and Jeff in camp because Oliver was six-two and Jaimie was five-seven, but known by the more personal and intimate names of Big Tiddy and Little Tiddy by those who had known them back in Regis. Within a week after they got to camp, Paul Tullis arrived with the President's "Greetings" still warm in his memory.

When their period of basic training was over, the unit moved out of the state to Fort Benning, Georgia, where they were put through their final, more rigid advanced infantry training with special assault and support weapons, except that the special weapons were still nonexistent and they trained with mockups that simulated BARs, machine guns, mortars, grenade launchers, and tank destroyers and such. In time they received their post-training furloughs, and every man was ready, able, and more than willing to lay down his arms and go back to his home town to preen and strut and stand about with shoulders braced, head erect, flattened belly sucked in, to enjoy the sudden elevated status of "soldier," which could now be translated into "savior," and permit himself to be singled out for family admiration and feminine adulation. There was the usual "scoop," one rumor after another, that they would be moving out as soon as they got back from furlough, and that they should make the most of this probably last opportunity to return home before leaving the United States.

"Where?" was the question uppermost in their minds and on their lips. There were many answers: to some ship-out camp called a "staging area"; then overseas to Africa, England, the Pacific, the Aleutians; perhaps to launch a direct offensive at France or Italy. The rumors covered every possibility except that of being left behind in the United States.

Two days before their furloughs were to begin, the company had been on guard duty, and after having exposed himself to two nights of chilled, rainy weather, Luther checked in to the dispensary with a heavy cold and a rising temperature, hardly able to talk

above a low, raspy voice that sounded more like he was clearing his throat than speaking. Dispensary sent him to the base hospital, and there Luther spent his precious furlough. He sent word to Carrie by Dale.

"Anybody else?" Dale asked, genuinely sorry for Luther in this most horrible of all predicaments, since he knew there would be little opportunity for a furlough when this one was over.

"No," Luther was barely able to whisper. "Nobody else. You tell Carrie I'll write to her."

In the fourteen days he spent at the hospital until the men returned from furlough to rejoin the unit, Luther had mended quickly. More than anything else he longed to see Carrie, but after a week had gone by he was satisfied with his enforced hospitalization, feeling secure from Marcus Radford or the need to face Miss Bethann. The occasional bold thoughts he had had about Bethann had disappeared with the thought that they might come face to face again. Even though it meant not seeing Carrie, he now felt that this was best for all concerned.

There was a certain amount of freedom granted the unit before they were shipped out of Benning. He began to take pleasure in his own trim sharpness, had his uniform cut down to fit him properly at the post tailor shop. He was hardened by months of hard drill and muscle-building exercises and had been verbally commended for his ability to respond to orders and instruction; and this had stood him in good stead on the rifle and pistol range where he qualified as expert with carbine, M-1, pistol, and was remarkably adept with the BAR and light machine gun. Others in the company looked up to him, came to him to discuss problems concerning their own lack in this direction.

He was happy earning his first steady, legitimate money, little as it was in comparison to what he could be earning as a driver for Tam, but his conscience was eased greatly by hearing from Carrie that the government was sending her the monthly allotment he had ordered. His own needs were few, and when he felt flushed, he would send another ten- or twenty-dollar money order to her, telling her to buy something special for herself and not to worry about it because there was more than he needed for himself.

Meanwhile, he met other men from other states: city men from Nashville and Atlanta and Jacksonville and Birmingham and New Orleans; crackers and backwoodsmen from places called Lily Pond, Three Feathers, Ticklerib, Muleback, Jenkins Arch, Hawkins Spit,

Hot Water, and Two Peaks. Occasionally there would be men from New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, and Washington. He listened and absorbed the conversations of these men, strangers all, who had been thrown together by the war; and then he came to realize that apart from certain traits that were local or personal to each, they were all very much alike—with the same basic urges, drives, needs, loves, prejudices, and hatreds; they were big and petty, clever and dull, kind and cruel, open-handed and selfish.

He patronized the U.S.O. and marveled at the men who could mix easily and gaily with anyone and everyone; that there were non-professionals, ordinary G.I.'s like himself, who could play the piano, a guitar, or a saxophone, or sing, dance, and tell jokes to entertain crowds. He met several local girls who were exceptionally nice and several others who were not so nice, and he found the former pleasant, but was ill at ease in their presence, unable to compete with his fellow soldiers in witty small talk; the second group of girls, he found eager to be pleasant to him, and he was shocked to learn the asking price for a few minutes of intimate warmth in a cheap motel room, the back of a car, in a barn or a dark alley leaning up against a building. Five dollars. More than a dollar a minute! And so eager to get it over with and go on to the next soldier who had a five-dollar bill in his hand, or who had been drinking and could be taken for more.

He was indeed happy when all furlough periods in the unit were over and they were shipped north to a camp in New Jersey for staging before going overseas from the Port of New York.

Carrie's letter, written sometime in November of 1942, read in part:

—and so a few months ago Miss Bethann she come home from New Orleans and she brout home a baby girl with her. She just pulled back from all her friends and she don't hardly ever leave the hall. Its a sin and a shame how she don't care nothing at all how her daddy or nobody else in Regis feels about it. She just keeps to herself and takes care of the baby and don't pay any never mind to Mr. Marcus or cnybody else. The baby's name is Harriet and she is sure cute. Mr. Marcus and Miss Bethann don't ever talk to each other. We are getten your check from the government

every month and so thank you. Pa is still the same I guess you know what I mean. Take good care of yourself, Luther dear and please come home well and soon.

Love from your sister,
CARRIE

At this very moment, Luther was damning Fate bitterly from another hospital bed in the staging area, not yet over a siege of pneumonia, saddened grievously because during this second hospitalization he had been left behind by his unit which, earlier this month, had landed in French North Africa under a lieutenant general named Eisenhower. To have been left behind was insufferable, and here in the hospital he was surrounded by total strangers, people who gave not a thought or a damn for him, so unlike the men he had lived and trained and eaten and enjoyed life with. And now, re-reading Carrie's letter over again, the realization came to him slowly, then penetrated deeply into his mind that the news of Miss Bethann was of terrible and startling importance to him. *If what Carrie had written him about Miss Bethann and her baby was true, then Harriet must be his own daughter! She had to be! There could be no other explanation!* The thought of it alone caused him to become feverish. He was actually a father—the father of Miss Bethann's daughter, Harriet!

Why hadn't she let him know? She could have got his address from Carrie, couldn't she? But no, she wouldn't have wanted Carrie or anyone else to know. Particularly Mr. Marcus. According to Carrie, no one knew anything about the baby's father; and if anyone knew, Carrie, working at the Hall with that know-everything, Sudie, would certainly have known. So she would keep it to herself. But, by God, he would do what was right, all right; as soon as he could get back to Regis, he would go to her and say, "Miss Bethann, you and me, we got to do something, the right thing, to protect Harriet. Give her her father's name and—"

In the first flush of his excitement he saw no obstacles; it would all work out, he thought with placid satisfaction. Sure, it would work out fine, being husband of a beautiful girl like Miss Bethann, the proud father of a daughter named Harriet Dorman, and pretty as her mother, by God Almighty! He thought impatiently, I wish this goddamned war was over already so I could go home and—

And then a sudden cold fear rolled over him. Jesus! he thought. What's Marcus Radford goin' a say about all this when he finds out it's me who's father to Harriet?

By the time Luther had recovered fully from his attack of pneumonia and was praying urgently with a sense of futile hopelessness that he might catch up with his original outfit, he was again stricken, this time with an ear infection that was sufficiently serious to have him sent to a general hospital. Understandably, he fell into a fit of deep depression, and for a time it was thought he might even have to be transferred to a ward for psychoneurotics; but the infection cleared up and finally he was restored to full duty. From the New York Port of Embarkation he went overseas with a Midwestern outfit that had trained in Texas and California, and so the men were completely strange and foreign to him. In his mind was one fixed idea: if they got to Africa, he would make every effort to find his original outfit with Dale, the Tidwell brothers, Hank Luftin, Paul Tullis, and the rest of his friends. The idea of having to fight the balance of this war with a lot of strangers was unthinkable.

By the time his new outfit reached Africa, the land had been wrested from the German and Italian troops. He gave himself little hope of finding Dale here and haunted the company office asking for a transfer to any outfit that was moving up. He finally went AWOL, caught a truck ride into Oran, and was picked up by the MP's and placed aboard an LST bound for Sicily. After a violent ride across the Straits of Messina, he found himself in Italy, making eager inquiries for his old unit, but with little success.

Luther listened to the radio in a small camp just outside of Rome on June 6, 1944, while OVERLORD, the massive invasion across the English Channel into Normandy, took place, seeing in the depth of his mind's eye Dale, Hank, Paul, Big Tiddy, and Little Tiddy wading ashore with the masses of man power then hitting the beaches. With many others he cheered drunkenly in celebration and toasted the false hope that before the end of 1944 they would all be back in the United States again, perhaps even by Christmas; that is, either home or on their way there. To Luther it was empty talk. He felt that as long as he was separated from his original outfit and friends, he was no part of this victory.

The lie was put to that futile dream of "home for Christmas" when he and several hundred other casualties were sent by truck back to Naples to embark for England, later across the now-safe Channel into France. Not until early in March, some weeks after the Battle of the Bulge at Bastogne, did Luther catch up with the shooting war

when he was sent in with a group of much-needed replacements after the Rhine had been successfully bridged and crossed.

Happily, too, had the long arm of coincidence finally been extended in his direction, for the division he was joining, save for heavy replacements, contained the remnants of the original outfit that had left him behind back in 1942 when they sailed out of the New York Port of Embarkation.

When the truck crunched to its first stop in over four hours, a sentry flashed his blue light into the cab, spoke briefly to the driver, then rode the runningboard through a gateway up to a small building some forty yards ahead. Luther read the illuminated dial of his watch: 0135 hours.

Outside, the night was black. The men inside the truck shuddered as the back flap was opened and the cold, cutting wind knifed inside in wicked swirls, rousing them to muttered protests. They wore lined field jackets over wool sweaters, OD trousers tucked into high combat boots, knit wool caps under their steel helmets. On their hands they wore combination wool-and-leather gloves with wool inserts. The temperature outside had dropped another few degrees.

The driver untied the last flap and was calling to the men inside, "Okay, you guys! Let's get movin'! You been sleepin' long enough! Off an' on! Let's go! Off an' on! Off your asses an' on your feet. Let's hike!"

The men made no special effort to speed up their movements as they heard the chanted singsong orders, ignoring the driver as though he didn't exist. They stretched and yawned and creaked out of their dazed half-sleep, then slowly made their way toward the tailgate, jumped or climbed down, groaned in chorus as their stiff knees bent from the force and shock of their own weight, shivered as they caught sight of the piles of ice-crusting snow that edged both sides of the narrow side road, slipped on the icy road as they moved about to try to keep warm.

One man remained on the truck to throw their gear down, and then he, too, now loosened and warmed somewhat by his activity, jumped down to join the rest of them. The driver ignored his former charges, leaned up against the front fender of the truck, smoked a cigarette that was cupped inside the cavern of his gloved hands to keep the lighted tip from showing. He was talking to the sentry who had permitted them to enter the enclosure and now, out of boredom,

had come up to make conversation as he stamped his boots into the ground to work up circulation in his legs. The sentry said, "How's it goin', Polack?"

"Like everything else in this loused-up Army. Busted, frozen, or snafu-ed," the driver replied.

"What're you haulin' this trip?"

"Twenny-one replacements an' a load of C and K."

"C and K," grumbled the sentry. "Jesus Q. Christ, just what we need. C and K. You think we'll ever get to taste a goddamn hot meal again? Just one more time at least?"

The truck driver's voice rose a notch to match the belligerence of the sentry's tone. "Well, goddamn it, don't make it sound like it's my fault. I only drive the truck. The Q.M. don't let me load it with all the goodies I want. B'sides, who's tellin' you guys to go so fast you got to outrun your own supply lines? You in a hurry to get to a town loaded with them frauleins and hausfraus?"

The sentry said, "The way General Bentley's pushing, you'd think his own family was in the next town and it was up to him personally to rescue 'em." He began slapping his arms around his body to create warmth.

The driver said, "Yeah, man! Them frauleins and hausfraus. 'Treat 'em gentle, be understandin' an' polite, be the gennlemen conquerors.' That's what the captain says. Yes, sir. You do all that an' they'll welcome you with mattresses on their backs. Man! I'd sure hate to be the first German broad I catch up with. I'm goin' a—"

"Boy, you took the words right out of my mouth," the sentry said, kneeling into a hunched-over crouch to light a cigarette.

A figure materialized out of the dark, coming down from a ghost-like barn building up ahead. The driver nudged the sentry, who quickly threw his cigarette to the ground and stepped on it. The figure was that of a sergeant who approached them with surly silence, hands shoved deeply into his trousers pockets, shoulders huddled inward against the bitter cold of the early morning, frowning his annoyance at being disturbed to check in the new men and bed them down until they could be properly dispersed in the light of morning. One of the replacements had just struck a light for a cigarette, failing to shield the glow of the flame properly.

"No lights, you stupid half-wit!" the sergeant snapped out quickly. "Put it out." To the rest of the men, "Pick up yoah gear an' follow me." He turned back toward the barn without a second glance at the replacements as they hurriedly hefted their packs, shouldered the canvas bags, and trudged along behind him.

Luther felt the only warmth of the long day in the soft cadence of the sergeant's accent. At least, he thought, he would have something in common with one Southern boy. He moved along now, grateful that he had known enough, by sure God, not to pull a dumb thing like lighting a cigarette at night this close to the lines. Close to the lines. He mouthed the words again. After over two years of moving from one already captured area to another like a gypsy, he was here. Close to the lines. And assigned to a permanent infantry outfit. He found himself thinking ahead with mixed and uncertain emotions. When? How soon? I wonder how it's goin' a be, shootin' at the real, livin' enemy instead of birds an' ducks an' targets an'—

"Pick it up, you guys," he heard the sergeant's voice drift back from up ahead. "Pick it up. Come on, now. Sooner you git to that buildin' up theah, th' sooner you get to sack in; an' we put in an early call foah breakfast aroun' heah."

Luther smiled again in the dark. There might even be a few more of our boys around if there's this one, he said hopefully to himself.

Inside the barn one lamp burned dimly. The sergeant pulled out a flashlight and threw a strong, narrow beam along the far end of the structure, bringing it up one side and down the other, revealing two long rows of stalls. Men were bundled up in blankets, sleeping singly and in doubles in the stalls, fully clothed.

"Pick out yoah stalls, two men to each, then sack in. Don't try to take yoah clo'es off or you'll freeze yoah tender, Stateside asses off. Git what sleep you can real fast 'cause weah movin' out come day-break, an' that's only a few hours away. Just so's you'll know, my name's Lang. An' you-all guessed right. I'm f'm Alabama. That's in the South an' I don' need no wise-crackin' about it. You goin' a find a lot of us Rebs in this friggin' outfit 'cause this was originally a Reb outfit that's got itself all loused up with damyankees an' westerners an' God-only-knows what the hell else that got sent in to replace our boy's got shot up.

"Now one moah thing I want you-all to know. I'm just puttin' on this here thick accent so's you'll know for sure weah a Reb outfit." His voice changed over from the slow drawl to a brisk sharpness. "From now on I'll talk American and it'll be plain enough for every last one of you to understand. And when I give an order, you'd better hear me the very first time. That's all for now."

He snapped off the flashlight and went outside. In the dimness of the single lamp Luther stumbled into a stall, fell up against a curled-up body that rolled over and exploded, "What the hell!"

"Sorry, soldier," Luther replied. "It's darker'n the inside of a

sharecropper's pockets after he's been paid off for his year's work."

"Oh," the sleepy voice said from beneath the blanket. Then, "Who the hell're you?"

"Replacement. Twenty-one of us just come up."

"Twenny-one. Is that all? Chrissakes, that's more'n we been losin' between meals. A *hundred* an' twenny-one wouldn't be enough. We're shorter'n a two-foot midget tryin' to get to a six-foot dame. Where you-all comin' from?"

"Been movin' up ever since we come across the Channel about a month-six weeks ago. Like homin' pigeons."

The other man snorted mirthlessly. "Christ Almighty! You lucky pigcons sure got you one helluva homecomin' to look forward to. Where you from? In the States, I mean."

"A little ol' town you never even heard of, name of Regis. My name's Dorman. Luther Dorman. Private."

"Hi. I'm Joe Galliano. A *paisan* from Brooklyn. Regis? Did you say Regis? Hell, boy, you're sure enough home. This was a cracker outfit when it got started. I think Hagen's from your home town."

"Hagen?" Luther's voice quickened with excitement. "You don't mean Dale Hagen, do you? For sure?"

"I sure as hell don't mean nobody else but. Tech Sergeant Dale Hagen's for sure, all right. You know him?"

Excitedly, "Sure. Sure I know him. We're close neighbors. Enlisted together the same day. Lived only a couple miles apart. We worked together awhile for the same outfit. I even went to school with the girl he married. Ruth-Rachel Pierce."

"Well, I'll be go-to-hell. He finds out you're here in the cold, wet morning, we might even have us a big hoedown with barbecued C and K rations, by God. Well, well. You better hit your sack now. Daylight ain't no more'n two or three winks of shuteye away."

"Sure. Sure. Glad to meet you, Joe. Good night."

"Sure. Good night, Reb."

5.

In the postdawn dimness, although it seemed to Luther that less than ten minutes had passed since he lay down beside Joe Galliano, he struggled to wakefulness through the stiffness and chill of a heavy gray mist that fought reluctantly to give way to the coming light. Huge, shadowy, wrinkled shapes lumbered about the stable muttering imprecations and curses, calling upon the Lord above to bear witness to their having already served their many hells on earth and to bring on the heaven now due them. Or at least a hot

meal with good coffee. They cursed Hitler who caused it all, their draft boards, former employers, every man not in uniform, the military in Washington, their own commanders, the weather, each other; there was no shortage of things or people to curse.

Joe Galliano nudged Luther into action. "Come on, flannelmouth," he urged, "you better get your cotton-pickin' ass off'n that cotton-pickin' floor an' out a this here cotton-pickin' barn. Captain'll be around lookin' his new boys over. Just you remember: all's required a you is to give your name, rank, an' serial number. Don't be givin' no information that'll give aid an' comfort to the enemy. And you take it from me, boy, that Captain Wentworth, he's our natural-born enemy."

Luther yawned, scratched his body under the rumpled field jacket. "Jesus," he said. "I feel like I ain't even been asleep."

"Chances are you ain't been, but you'll catch up one a these days when we take a day off so's to let the krauts get a little ahead of us. Captain Evelyn—that's EEEEEvelyn, you goddam' Yankee bastards!" Galliano mimicked— "Wentworth, now, he's a fox-huntin' man from way the hell deep in South Carolina an' he believes in givin' them enemies a sportin' chance."

Whistles began to blow and the barn emptied itself into a flat of ground near a smaller building from which a group of officers came spilling out. A lieutenant came directly toward them. A tech sergeant peeled away from a small knot of non-coms to the right of the barn, carbine slung on his shoulder, alternately rubbing and blowing on his bare hands. He joined the lieutenant and walked along with him. Now a tall, lanky captain swung over to meet them. The tech sergeant took several steps in advance of the two officers and called out, "You new men come in last night. Fall in over here."

The twenty-one men lined up in two rows, standing somewhat loosely at attention. "At ease," the sergeant called softly. The lieutenant and captain walked up and down between the two rows of men, scanning each face that peered out from under its steel helmet. When they finished, the captain turned to the sergeant and said, "All right, Hagen," in sharp, clipped words. "They're not much to look at, but they're all yours. Might be one or two among 'em you can do something with. Spread 'em out among the others and let's don't waste any time. We're moving up soon's we chow."

"Okay," Dale Hagen said with the ease and informality of long and close association, a tone of respect for ability rather than for rank.

Luther's excitement grew from the moment he recognized Dale

Hagen, hard, grim, unshaven, sure of each movement as though reluctant to waste a step or a breath. The captain and lieutenant gone, Hagen walked past the men and peered into each face as the officers had only a few moments before. When he came to Luther, there was a light flickering smile of mute recognition, a momentary hesitation; then he moved along and Luther felt a sharp pang of disappointment, then realized that Dale could hardly single him out before the others. Hagen finished his inspection and stood before the group.

"Okay, men, let's fall out for chow now, and afterwards I'll assign you-all to your platoons. Two volunteers—you and you—" he pointed while the others smiled at this old, worn joke—"go behind that shed and draw C rations for twenty-one men. Later, you'll each one of you draw your own ammo, water, and rations for the rest of the day."

The two men so designated as volunteers started for the shed. As Luther turned, he saw that Dale was eyeing him, a smile playing across his lips. Dale motioned his head to one side and Luther detached himself from the others and moved toward the small clump of trees. Dale reached them a few steps ahead of Luther, began ripping a K-ration box open. He handed it to Luther, put his other hand out for a tight handshake, smiling broadly in welcome.

"Hidy, Luther boy," he said. "You a little late catchin' up to us. What's been keepin' you?"

"I know, Dale—" Luther smiled with sheer happiness at being so close to his old friend—"and I been trying like all hell to catch up to you ever since you guys left me behind at the New York P.O.E.—Africa, Italy, England, France, and finally, here. I'm sure glad I made it before it was all over."

"I am, too. Paul Tullis is here. He's a corporal with HQ. You'll get to see him. Tobe Sharkey got it on Omaha Beach. Big Tiddy's with us, too. Little Tiddy, he got his back in Africa right in the beginning. You'll see a few others around, but there's not too many left that started out with us. We taken a hell of a beating these last three years. Outfit's shot to hell and full of replacements."

"Like me, I guess," Luther said with self-guilt.

"I guess," Dale agreed nonchalantly with a grin, "but I guess you're a little different. At least we all started out together. Don't feel too bad about it. What you missed, I'd of been glad enough to've missed most of myself." He paused to munch on the cheese and a cracker. "You seen much action?"

Luther shook his head. "Nothing at all. Missed it all the way

up, down and across." He slapped his carbine. "My closest buddy," he grinned. "Ain't ever been fired in anger, like they say. Only at paper targets back in the States, some tin cans in Africa and Italy. The only Germans or Italians I seen, they were already prisoners. No action at all," he added sadly.

"You don't know how lucky you are," Dale said grimly. "But you'll see some of it before it's all over. You might even get you a battle star or two to wear after you get home. Anyway, it's good seein' you, Luther. I'll keep you close to me when I assign the new men. We'll sit and talk some more later on when we get the time. You—" He paused, then said, "Did you get home any before you came overseas?"

"No, Dale, I didn't. I come right out of the hospital."

"Well, anyway, welcome back. I'll see you a little later. I got to go now. Get your chow. Eat all you can when you can. You never know how long it's got to last."

"Sure," Luther said. "See you later."

Luther drew his assignment to Captain Wentworth's Fox Company, Lieutenant Crawford's A Platoon, which was Dale's as well. Here he met Ollie Tidwell, his six-two body shrunken on its once-full frame, tired and gaunt now after nearly three years of combat. There was the sadness of the loss of his brother Jaimie on him as well, the vacant look in his eyes as he responded to Luther's greeting.

"Oh. It's you," Tidwell acknowledged without cordiality.

"How you been, Big—uh—Ollie?" Luther asked.

Dully, with little interest, the lanky man replied, "Like you see me. Where you been goofin' off all this time?"

"Tryin' to catch up with you," Luther replied, trying to add a carefree note he did not feel before this grim caricature of the once good-natured man he had known.

"Too bad you didn't try no harder," Tidwell commented wryly. "You might of been around to keep somebody from takin' the big one."

Luther's temper flared. "You mean I might of been there to take it instead of Jaimie, don't you?" he retorted.

"I didn' say that."

"No, but you damn well meant— Oh, let it go," Luther said, unwilling to continue this line. "I'm sure sorry Jaimie got it, Ollie. I just hope—"

But Oliver Tidwell had turned and walked off.

The moist air turned to rain that froze almost as soon as it hit the ice-crusted ground. The men went back to the barn and other farm buildings that offered even a minimum of shelter to wait for their orders to move out, hoping there would be none so they could get a full day of rest. Luther went back to the stall he had shared with Joe Galliano, found Paul Tullis waiting to greet him. There was more news. Shad Cooper lay in a grave in France, he learned, Fred Walters got his only a month ago; but Henry Luftin and Gabe Stanley joined them as they stood talking. "We're just about all that's left of the Regis boys. Us, Big Tiddy, and Dale," Paul said.

Luther shook the hands Gabe and Henry extended, but felt no warmth. It was as though they resented him for not having been with them to take each hard, murderous blow they had experienced until now. Gabe and Henry nodded and walked to one side where they stood talking for a while, shared cigarettes, then left the barn together without a word to Luther or Paul.

Tullis nodded after them, said, "They'll get over it. Wasn't easy watchin' good old friends gettin' knocked off like mallards comin' in 'cross the Welcome to feed on the wild grain in the Swamp."

Luther said angrily, "Well, goddamn it, I didn't buy me no tourist ticket for this lousy war. It wasn't my fault I had to stay behind, was it? That's just the way it worked out. Instead of bein' glad to see me, you'd think I was nothin' but a damn' draft-dodger."

Paul shook his head. "They been through a lot, Luther. All of us. Once you been in a couple a tangles together, you'll be as much a regular as everybody else. It takes a little time. that's all."

"Sure. Sure," Luther agreed with some slight ire, "I guess so."

6.

On this side of the Rhine, Luther soon learned, the complexion of the war was different. The "invincible" German military machine was retreating in considerable disorder, called upon to perform the necessary and desperate act of defending too much with too little. Certain areas and sectors were declared indefensible and were bypassed, abandoned. Herman Goering's much-heralded air strength had been dissipated, was virtually nonexistent. That the Germans were moving back without too much harassment from the Allies was, for the moment, due to more than a week of heavy snow and rain and low-hanging clouds that acted as a protective cover for the fleeing. Piper Cub planes, used for spotting, were grounded along with fighter and bomber activity. Every day they

could hear the planes overhead, probing for a break in the overcast, searching, waiting, hungry and eager.

Only the well-equipped and organized Wehrmacht groups remained intact, trying against incalculable odds to stem the frightening progress of seven invading armies of the Allies. *Der Vaterland*, already reeling under the repeated and constant daylight and night bombings by the Air Corps and RAF, was now sampling a similar pounding on the ground. Under massive attack from every direction, the Germans could reply with only a "corporal's war," a multitude of piecemeal hit-and-run fights. Occasionally there was a stiffening in retreat, but no substantial counterattack could thus far be mounted as the race toward Berlin quickened.

The hounds in hot pursuit of the hare were now, for the first time in months, buoyant with confidence of the final outcome, yet the nagging fear of the most personal of all defeats—death—was ever present beneath surface thoughts, conversations, actions. So close to victory, each man constantly wondered how much longer he could elude "the one with my name, rank, and serial number on it." Suddenly the game of war became much deeper, more grim and serious than before. Luck and the Law of Averages were subjects discussed with increasing frequency. It was all a man could do to keep from putting the words in a letter home: *I'm getting scared. I've been holding the dice too long. It's got to catch up with me sometime soon. Time's running out.*

So they pushed on, passing the debris of the Wehrmacht in retreat, staring in mute fascination at the wreckage of abandoned vehicles along their advancing path, the broken bodies and skeletons of what had once been the strongest military force in the world. The unconquerables, Hitler had called them.

There were delays. Teller and shoe mines had been sown along the roads, slowing the onrushing Americans down while the mines were located and removed or exploded. Huge trees had been felled, chained together across forest roads, then booby-trapped. Bridges were blown up or weakened enough to collapse under heavy loads. But the Americans were not new to these devices so late in the game. The roadblocks were snagged onto lines attached to tanks or half-tracks, then yanked apart and exploded; bridges were rebuilt or replaced quickly with pontoons. And so the delays occurred, but with the Army engineers putting forth one of the finest efforts and contributions of the war, they were like mosquito bites on the hide of an elephant.

The next few days of the chase were as exciting to Luther as they were uneventful and dull to the rest of General Bentley's command. The enemy had been pushing ahead with every ounce of speed it could gather, and aside from a few straggler-prisoners and some abandoned equipment, they might just as well have been chasing the heavy ground mist. Luther began to feel a strong urge to make contact, however small, with the enemy, hoping in this way to "get with it"—to experience his baptism of fire with his own unit and friends and thus be elevated to respectability and acceptance by them.

Five more days of pursuit passed, slogging along in the heavy, persistent rain that alternated with snow. It was a Saturday, March 17. The advance units—Baker, Dog, and Fox Companies—rolled to a mid-morning halt, and Captain Evelyn Wentworth, along with the company commanders of Baker and Dog, was ordered back to Regimental HQ for a conference with General Bentley, the division commander.

The stop was made at a farmhouse that was taken over by the officers of the three companies, a large barn and several smaller outbuildings for the men. Trucks, tanks, half-tracks, and other vehicles and pieces of rolling equipment were parked in orderly rows and a guard set, though no longer in fear of an air attack. The field kitchen that had finally caught up with them became business-like with the preparation of a hot meal for all.

At 1300 the three company commanders returned to the farmhouse. Captain Wentworth sent out a call for Lieutenant Crawford of A Platoon of Fox Company, Technical Sergeant Dale Hagen, and Sergeant Phil Rupertus. Lieutenant Presley Crawford was apprehensive in the presence of Wentworth and the two sergeants, feeling out of place among them because of his total lack of combat experience and only seven weeks out of Infantry OCS at Fort Benning.

Crawford was built slightly, about twenty-four, and with only one thought in mind: to have done with this dirt and filth and disease and death and get home to Birmingham, Alabama, marry Joyce Cameron, finish his law studies, and get to hell into the safety of Laurence Cameron's law office as a junior partner. How junior a partner he would be no longer mattered. What had been a romantic, adventurous dream back in Georgia had turned out to be the most horrifying nightmare imaginable over here. The waste, the colossal waste of men, food, equipment, labor, and materials taken from civilian need; and the florid-faced major in the replacement depot in England who regarded him with annoyance and snapped wasp-

ishly, "Waste? Waste? Sure, it's waste. The finest goddamned waste in the world. Don't you realize, for Christ's sake, that Waste is what's winning the war for us? That we've got more men and ships and planes and guns and food and ammo and cigarettes and every goddamned thing else to waste than the Germans? They're losing a war because they can't waste as many ball bearings as we can, because we can waste more trains than they can, because we can junk planes and trucks and everything else because we've got 'em to waste and they haven't.

"And one of these days when you're home and got kids who ask you, 'Daddy, who won the war?' you can damn well tell them: Waste won the war. Waste. Nothing else." And then the major had sat gloomily in the pub staring into his glass of ale while the other veterans who had heard him were silent and nodded grimly.

Now in a room in a German farmhouse with blazing fires going in the iron stove and the fireplace, Crawford stood nervously in the presence of hardened experience wondering: what will this next hour bring?

Rupertus and Hagen stood at the window staring out at the sullen sky. Crawford sat at the table. They waited for Wentworth, who was in the next room talking with the company commanders of Baker and Dog. They heard his low, bass voice as it came closer to them. The door opened and he entered the room, a huge, bear-like man who seemed constantly to be trying to hide an inner gentleness with a blanket of gruffness. Wentworth, a successful plumbing contractor in civilian life, had learned long ago that personal attachments in combat invariably led to exchanges of confidences, letters, pictures of children, and odds-and-ends bits of information that a man would never part with except under these circumstances; and that one day, he would be called upon to write a letter home to a man's wife or father or mother and the little things he already knew about the dead man left him desolate and desperately alone. Now, as Wentworth entered the room, Crawford leaped up from the chair and called a very brisk, OCS-sharpened, "Ten-shut!"

Rupertus and Hagen turned wearily from the window with mild amusement at the crisp order. Wentworth, caught off guard by a formality that had long ago been abandoned at the front, appeared somewhat embarrassed by it. Quickly, he said, "At ease, men," and Crawford relaxed, suddenly aware that he had played the rookie again.

Wentworth noticed Crawford's state of hesitation and uncertainty and tried to make it easier for him by indicating a place beside him

at the table. Hagen and Rupertus stood on the opposite side, facing them. The captain lit a cigarette, laid the package on the table with his lighter, and said in his most businesslike tone, "All right, fellows, light up and listen carefully. If you haven't already guessed it, good old Fox Company gets to carry the ball again. Rupe, Dale, pull up those chairs and sit down while we go over it."

Rupertus went to the far side of the room and brought the two additional chairs to the table. Wentworth had put his map case on the table, opened it for all to see, pointing to a red marker that indicated where they were at that moment.

"Ever since we crossed the Rhine, as you know, we've been curving along this line, away from our main body, for only one reason, an important one: to push after General Ronstadt's division and keep jabbing him off balance, keep him from linking up with any other unit for additional strength, or let him pick up replacements or equipment for what he's lost. Right now, he's hurting; but if he can get away from us and get himself resupplied, he could dig in and give us bloody hell. This Ronstadt is no Johnny-come-lately, *Hitler-über-alles* Nazi soldier. He's strictly a product of the German General Staff—a rough, tough turkey of the old school who's as wily as a fox after a sheep.

"The briefing at HQ included some of the top intelligence boys from Corps and Army. Not a damned thing from Air because of the lousy flying weather. There's been no sign of a break in it for over a week." He pointed to a broad, heavily shaded area on the map. "This is the forest up ahead, Grünwald, some five or six miles north of us. It's a big area and there's no telling what's in there waiting for us.

"Ronstadt might have passed through it sometime last night. He might still be in there waiting to clobber hell out of us as we come through. And we've got no other way to move except up that road." He paused with dramatic emphasis then said, "So the big question is—" He stopped and looked up at Hagen and Rupertus.

Hagen said it for him, "Just where the hell are they?"

Wentworth: "More like just what the hell are they up to?"

Rupertus: "A whole goddamned outfit with tanks and anti-tank half-tracks and trucks and infantry just ups and disappears? Like that?"

"It's a big forest," Wentworth said.

"They can't move all that stuff around in a thick woods, for Christ's sake, can they?" Dale said, staring at the map. "Either they

passed through it into this next wooded area up above it here, or else—”

“Or else,” Wentworth concluded, “they want us to believe they did and are laying back waiting for us to come racing through. Sitting there with enough concentrated power to whitewash us, particularly if we come through bunched together. And if it’s a trap, they’ll have it figured out so we won’t be able to spread out very far.”

The four men studied the map in silence. Only the one main road, running from south to north, showed upon it, curving gently to the west. There were no other markings to indicate other roads; the sum total of available information lay here before them. Rupertus got up and walked over to the fireplace, picked up two more logs and added them to the flames, then came back to the table.

“Okay, here’s the word,” Wentworth resumed. “I’ll give you everything they gave me, and it’s not too much. We’re five, almost six miles from this Grünwald area. Division has it from a few captured officers and enlisted men that our baby, Ronstadt, is under special orders from the paperhanger himself to defend every inch of German soil as he would a shrine; that, and a lot more of the same old crap like the kind you get from the coach in the dressing room between halves of a football game when you’re seven or fourteen points behind. The orders state specifically that every unit from *kompanie* to *korps*, every soldier from *unteroffizier* to *general*, is committed to do everything individually and collectively possible to delay, obstruct, and destroy the enemy. Us.”

Rupertus and Hagen nodded. Crawford stood stiffly and mute, as though he were a disinterested observer, a casual onlooker instead of an actual participant in the discussion. It began to dawn upon him that by the time this conference came to an end, he would be committed to an action of some kind: a night patrol, no doubt. His mouth and throat went dry with the thought of it.

“The feeling at HQ,” Wentworth continued, “is that our clever fox should be getting tired of running without striking back. They think he is probably heading for a strategic point where he can expect to link up and combine with another unit for a strike of some kind. A counterattack.” He pointed to a town on the map, measured it off. “Fulda,” he said. “About ninety miles north of the Grünwald. They suggested that Fulda might very well be that meeting place. But there’s one problem. Beyond Grünwald there’s only this little bit

of a forest up here and after that they'll be out in the open. If the weather clears, Ronstadt knows our fly boys will murder him. He won't have a snowball's chance in hell to make it. If it stays murky the way it is, all they've got to worry about is us climbing up their tails. That gives Ronstadt one way out. He's got to buy his time from us, delay us while he races ahead to Fulda and gets into position—"

"How do they know all this, Captain, if they can't see from above? They got any prisoners who told them what's in this forest?"

Wentworth shook his head negatively. "No, they haven't, Dale. Your question is a good one and most of the answer is a little bit of fact and a lot of guesswork based on past performance by men who know Ronstadt, went up against him coming across France. That and some other intelligence gobbledygook. Whatever it is, it amounts to trying to outguess this squarehead. We'll call it Operation A-Stitch-in-Time. We'll waste some time finding out what's in the forest, but we may be cutting the whole thing short if they're holing up in there and we can get to them."

Dale said, "They figure the krauts are waiting to jump us in these woods when we go through?"

Wentworth shrugged his shoulders contemptively. "Anybody's guess. That is, until we know for sure what's in that blasted forest."

Rupertus said thoughtfully, "They can't stop us like that and they know it. Hell, it sounds like suicide for them."

Wentworth: "It might be just that in the end. But don't discount Ronstadt lightly. My own personal guess is that if they're inside Grünwald, they'll be broken up into harassment units of resistance, well placed to slow us down, the roads mined or blocked, rear-guard groups to pin us down while Ronstadt heads north to Fulda with his main body as fast as his wheels can carry him, and for damned sure before these skies clear up."

He paused for a moment, and in the silence Crawford's voice was heard for the first time since the discussion began. It came out low and bleak, as though from a dream. "Pa—patrol," he said, then repeated it more clearly and firmly, "Patrol."

It was as though he hadn't spoken at all since no one showed any sign of having heard him. Wentworth continued.

"So it means, as I said earlier, that Fox Company is given the dubious honor of carrying the ball. Tonight. We've been assigned to find out what the score is. We're to probe on a frontal approach. Charlie Company will move up along the west edge of the forest, Dog Company on our east flank."

"We go straight up the road?" Rupertus asked.

Wentworth shook his head negatively. "Hell, no. It's probably mined from yea to yon. We'll leave that for the engineers to sweep for us once we know the rest of the area is safe."

Crawford sat in quiet study. Rupertus and Hagen exchanged quick glances as Wentworth picked up another cigarette and snapped his lighter open, drew a deep puff and exhaled the smoke.

"All right. We move in at dusk. About 1700. I want a patrol to scout those woods on the east side of the road. The map shows that it's higher, rolling ground, so it's more likely they'd dig in on that side. Ten men from A Platoon. With you three that'll make—" a wintry, brittle smile crossed his lips and faded—"thirteen. If you're superstitious, Lieutenant, you can drop one or add one, anyway you feel about it." He addressed himself to the two sergeants. "Lieutenant Crawford will take the patrol out. The balance of Fox Company will be held back at the edge of the forest in reserve."

Giving the orders thus, Wentworth's voice had changed. It was completely matter-of-fact and businesslike, as though he had been over this same process a hundred times or more—which, in fact, he had. "Okay. I'm not going to kid you about what you're looking for. Anything from snipers to Tiger tanks loaded for bear. Machine-gun nests supported by a tank or anti-tank gun. It's got to be some sort of a trap, or a series of them, to sucker us into some kind of a stupid move. If you find the first, be suspicious of the second. They could be grouped in pairs or spread out. That's not much to give you to go on, but it's all we've got. And that's only guesswork."

The last was said almost apologetically, as though he were sending a boy out to do a man's job—his job. "It's useless to commit the entire company. A squad can do a much better, quieter, and quicker job. Take along a handie-talkie just in case you're within range when you locate something. And remember—" he pointed to a sector well east of the road—"keep to hell away from the road or along its immediate sides. Keep inside this area for the protection the trees will give you."

Hagen and Rupertus again exchanged a fleeting glance, knowing now that the instructions were more for Crawford's benefit since this would be his first patrol. The lieutenant's drawn face and serious eyes indicated that he was at last aware of the immensity of the part he was being given, the responsibility for the lives of a dozen men. This was no play school, no game for OCS students. This was for keeps.

Wentworth: "Now pay close attention. This is an excursion to get information, not to start any private wars. We want a picture, as clear as you can bring back, of what's up there. I don't want any dead heroes this late in the game. If you can take a prisoner or two, great; but not if it means giving the whole show away." He re-emphasized a point. "We want the picture. We'll be a hell of a lot better off if, when we jump off, we know what we're jumping. And where. If you're jumped first, that's another story. Just keep in mind that information is what we're after. Also, please keep in mind that I want to see all of us on that homebound ship together. Okay?"

A pause; quiet nods of understanding and assent. "Okay. Come dusk, about 1700, you'll take off. We'll send you up in a truck to within a few hundred yards of the forest. Charlie and Dog Companies will move up after you sometime around 1730. Hagen, you check the men out. Lieutenant Crawford will meet you at the takeoff point by 1645. Good luck, guys—" Wentworth grinned behind the dark stubble of beard—"and just remember that Pappy won't be too far back of you."

Outside, Hagen and Rupertus walked back to the platoon area. Crawford had remained behind with Captain Wentworth at the latter's request. A platoon of Fox Company lay sprawled out over stacks of cases and gear that had been sent up by truck. Supply lines had been re-established and were functioning satisfactorily again. A number of new men were working at unloading gasoline and other supplies, stacking cases properly for immediate use while the others kibitzed and goaded them along. Mostly, however, they smoked, shot the breeze, and tried to catch a few winks of sleep while waiting for Hagen and Rupertus to return, knowing something would be coming up.

Crawford and Wentworth came out of the farmhouse and walked together toward the other small building where the officers of all three companies were billeted. Wentworth's hand gripped Crawford's arm in a friendly manner as he talked to the lieutenant and one of the men remarked, "The old man's holding the kid up again."

The men, as usual in the case of a replacement, and in particular with an officer, regarded Crawford with an indifference that bordered on the insolent. The lieutenant, now attached to his first permanent unit since leaving OCS, was taken aback by this unexpected and uncomradelike reception. No one had ever breathed or hinted that it would be like this, that he would not be welcomed

with open arms as a member of "the family." Even his brother officers were cool to him, and so he tried playing his hand alone; but with the closeness with which men lived together in war, this was impossible. Nor had anyone taken the trouble to explain to him—because there was no known way of making him understand—that the officer he was replacing, Jim Whipple, had been a man of such likable personality that any man in the outfit would have followed him under almost any circumstances. And many of these had. Whipple had been an All-American halfback for two years in a row at the University of Texas, played as a pro with the New York Giants, and was one of the best-liked officers in the regiment. Three weeks before Crawford came out of the combination replacement center-concentration camp at Litchfield in England after six weeks of psychological torture in the repple-depple designed to make any man seek the front lines, The Whip had been killed when, in the darkness, he had tripped over a dead German whose body had been booby-trapped with a mine.

Rupertus and Hagen approached the men silently, each fully aware that they would be carrying the additional burden of nurse-maiding Crawford through his first patrol, to bring him back safely; yet both could not help wondering why Wentworth hadn't chosen Lieutenants Greer or Bettancourt, instead of Crawford, with so much emphasis placed upon the importance of tonight's job.

"Who gets it, Dale?" Corporal Simon asked as they came up to the group.

"Who? You know who gets all the friggin' tough ones in this outfit, don't you? All right, you eager beavers," he called out to the men who were hanging back hoping to avoid the patrol. The men came forward slowly, standing loosely in a wide semicircle around the two sergeants, waiting to hear any names but their own. Dale looked over the group and began to count them off.

"Tennant, Katz, Galliano, Luftin, Trippe, Bender." He took a breath and looked over the men again. "Karylios, Page, and Clark." Luther was standing next to Clark, slightly in front of him, and Dale saw the appeal in his eyes. He thought, *What the hell. If Crawford can make it, so can Luther. He's got more sack time than Crawford has in the Army.* He added, "Dorman."

The men whose names were called started to move in closer to Hagen as the rest stepped back and away, relieved that they had not been called. In the forward and backward movement a hand was raised, and Dale, unable to recognize the man, one of the recent replacements, asked, "What's your name, soldier?"

"PFC Kelly Moran, Sergeant."

"What is it, Moran?"

"I'd like to make the patrol, Sergeant."

Dale smiled. "Not with a name like that. I don't want to be losing me an Irishman on St. Patrick's Day. Except maybe me. I'll keep you in mind for some other time. The rest of you come along with me while I line it out for you."

Luther moved to the front of the group, stood beside Dale, a small grin of satisfaction on his face as he listened to the professional tone of his friend issuing orders and assignments.

Dismissed, the men went back to their card games or letter-reading and -writing and shooting the breeze. Dale put out a hand and held Luther back for a moment. "You going to be okay, Luther?"

Luther smiled happily. "Sure, Dale. Thanks for picking me."

"If we find what we're looking for, it won't amount to much," Dale said. "But if they find us first, this could turn out to be more than a pool game, you know."

"I didn't enlist for any pool games, Dale," Luther replied earnestly. "Hell, this war is running out on me. Time I got some real learning, ain't it, instead of just hearing about it, getting it second-handed?"

"I guess you're right," Dale agreed. "It probably won't amount to much anyway. I'll keep you close to me. Just in case I need a runner."

"I ain't a bad shot, you know."

"I can remember you were always pretty good on a turkey shoot back home."

Luther smiled broadly. "I brung home a turkey for Thanksgiving every year since I was thirteen. You remember that. I once beat you out."

"Sure, I remember. You and that Robbie Tilebin. You remember him?"

"Robbie? Sure. I know him pretty good. He was a hell of a shot. Learned from old Mordecai and taught me a few tricks, too. I hope he didn't have to go. He was kind of scared about it. He already had one kid and another one on the way."

"With all that going for him, he probably didn't even get called up."

"I don't know. I run into lots of guys over here got one and two kids. I wonder if he did get into it."

Dale shrugged and looked at his watch. "We'll move out around 1700. You got less than three hours to write home, visit, or sack in."

You got any time left, come by and see me. I'll want to check you out before we push off."

7.

Back some two miles in the farmhouse that was temporary division headquarters, Major General Cleland Bentley stood facing the fireplace, rubbing his hands briskly as the flames warmed him. On the other side of the large room Corporal Paul Tullis said in a lowered voice to Sergeant Harley Davis, "Onliest man I ever did know who warms his pecker. Eve'ybody else I ever seen at a fire-place always had his back to it, warmin' up his ass."

"Hell," Davis replied, "he ever did anything like other people did, he just wouldn't be Roarin' Robert. You better get your own ass out on that there woodpile and put in about half a cord of logs or you won't have none left to get chewed out."

Major Edgar Thorpe left the small knot of officers who stood about the table waiting for some word from General Bentley and went out of the room. He had eaten his meal and stood on the steps lighting a cigarette. He then walked down the steps and across the roadway to the jeep where Lieutenant Harry Bledso sat, carbine across his lap. Thorpe was a replacement, sent up from convalescent leave after a lengthy stay in an English hospital for shoulder and arm wounds, a New Yorker who had formed a warm attachment for the handsome Bledso. He got into the jeep beside the lieutenant and said, "Let's go, You-all."

"Where away, Major?"

"Hell, I don't know. Anywhere. Let's just get away from the Old Man for a while. He's in there blistering the air again."

"The general? What's bugging him now? He's been acting so pleased lately."

"The same old thing. A hero."

"What hero?"

"A hero. A big, *big* hero. You know about that, don't you, Harry?"

"Well, I know he gets his back up every time some other outfit gets a Medal-of-Honor man."

"Well, boy, that's it. Everybody else has one except Bentley. It's that simple. Roaring Robert wants an outstanding hero in his division. According to him, that's not too much to ask. Listen, Harry, I'll run through this morning's session for you." He threw his head and shoulders back in imitation of the general, clearing his throat, turning his voice into a lower, harsher register.

"This war—pronounced Woe—is about over, gentlemen, and

what've we got to take back home with us, hm-m-m? They've got Medal-of-Honor winners everywhere. I repeat, *everywhere!* Signal, Quartermaster, Ordnance, Engineers, Transportation Corps, by God, they've all got at least one.

"The Air Corps, gentlemen, they've got 'em so thick, they have to isolate 'em from the few who haven't won it yet. Every division of infantry I know of has got 'em in clusters. And here we are, a first-line infantry outfit without a single outstanding one. Yet. Now, can we go home and march through the streets of Chancellor and tell our great governor and our fine folks who are depending on us that we haven't got us even one real, live, genuine bona fide hero in our whole outfit? Can we? Why, we'd be stoned out of the state, and rightfully so.

"Gentlemen, I know we've got a hero in this division, and I aim to find him before time runs out. I just know he's here. All we have to do is find him! Unquote, Lieutenant."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Bledso exclaimed in some slight awe.

"That was Roaring Robert's edict for the day. And yesterday. And will no doubt be the same tomorrow. Deliver up one god-damned Southern-fried hero. Selah!"

Bledso grinned broadly. "Well, now. All I can say to that is that if he wants one that badly, we're going to have us a hero all our very own, one the whole state can be proud to show off at parades, football games, and election rallies."

8.

By 1630 the patrol had eaten a meal of heated C rations, drawn extra ammunition and grenades, checked and oiled BARs, tommy guns, M-1s, and carbines against the cold, moisture-laden air, knowing they would be carefully inspected by Hagen before moving up. They sat apart from the rest of the platoon that was only now beginning to line up for chow. Letters had been written and given over to others to be mailed "just in case." There seemed to be little to talk about, every man being mostly concerned with his own gear and immersed in his personal and very private thoughts, remembering previous patrols that had started out as "creampuffs" and finished disastrously. They wanted no repetition of the traps and bitter struggles of the Huertgen Forest or the Reichswald that had cost so many lives, although they had been fortunate enough to have missed these two, and gladly.

"Sure," Kyle Tennant said to Bob Trippe, "nothin' to it, Hagen says. Nothin' to it. A breeze. He ain't lived in Florida, that's for

damn sure, else he'd know a breeze can turn into a hurricane and twist a steel girder into a pretzel. We been in a few of those 'breezes' before, so who's he think he's conning?"

"Rupe said it was a 'minor operation,'" Trippe retorted. "Hell, there ain't no such thing as a *minor* operation, here or on an operating table. Any time they put you to sleep and start monogramming you with a knife, there's no such thing as a *minor* operation. No more'n there's any such thing as a minor patrol. In my book, they're all major as hell."

Luther sat among them. There was something emotionally exhilarating as well as exciting and alarming in being a member of this tough combat team. Faces blackened, parka hoods drawn up over their helmets, weapons slung over shoulders or cradled in their laps, they were to him an anonymous band of professionals off on a bold adventure. Morrie Katz, the interpreter and radioman, checked out his handie-talkie radio and was satisfied that it was in good working order. There was a deadly seriousness that overrode their light—and nervous—surface attitude. Some sat honing combat knives, checking grenades that hung from ammo belts, testing the bolt action of their weapons as though they hadn't done this a dozen times already.

In the quiet stillness as Hagen checked them over with cold professional appraisal, Luther found himself short of breath with expectancy, possibly because he knew he was irrevocably committed to this skilled, effective fighting body, to his first combat patrol.

Hagen and Rupertus had completed their inspection and now stood apart, satisfied, smoking and speculating on what might lay ahead of them, waiting for Crawford and the truck that would take them to the mouth of the woods. There was little these two hadn't covered, every known possibility, the many imponderables and impossibles that might surprise them. They stood listening to the forced chatter of the men, using words to drive out inner uncertainties and fears.

Hagen said to Rupertus, "I'd better check Dorman out again, take him to one side and talk to him. He might need it. This is his first 'time out.'"

Rupertus: "How come you picked a raw one like him for tonight?"

Hagen: "How come Wentworth picked a raw one like Crawford for tonight?"

Rupertus, with a shrug: "I guess so. A guy's got to get his feet wet sometime. Might as well be in an ocean as in a creek."

Dale moved away from Rupertus, caught Luther's eye, and motioned him away from the others with a flick of his head. Luther got up and walked to a nearby tree, and in a few moments Dale joined him. He pointed to an oblong bulge in Luther's field-jacket pocket that he could see through the unzipped parka. "What you got there, Luther?"

"An extra package of K rations."

"Get rid of it. We won't be out that long. If you're hungry, get back in line and load up on some more hot chow before we check out. Don't lug along anything you don't have to. You got any pocket room to spare on you, take some more ammo or a couple of extra grenades along. In case you have to use it, it'll be a lot more useful than throwing a box of K rations."

"Okay, Dale." Luther removed the dark brown package from his pocket and held it until he would be able to get rid of it, replace it with more grenades or a couple of carbine clips. They stood for a moment with their backs to the tree smoking their cigarettes before Dale broke the silence. "Luther?"

Luther turned his head toward Dale without replying. "You been getting any mail from home lately?" Dale asked.

"Some. When it catches up to me. Last batch I got was about eight or ten letters from Carrie. Some of 'em were three-four months old, but I've been moving up pretty steady. There ought to be another batch trying to find me."

"How is Carrie?"

"She's fine. Worried about me some, but she's fine. Getting along all right."

"How's your father—Jud?"

"Jud?" Luther grimaced. "All right, I guess. Long's his corn whiskey holds out, he'll be just fine."

There was a momentary silence, then Dale said, "In any of Carrie's letters she ever mention she seen or talked to—Ruth-Rachel?"

"No—o," Luther replied slowly, "not as I recall, Dale. She might of some time ago, but not recent that I can remember. Ain't you heard from her? Or Aunt Lutie?"

"I hear from Ma once in a while all right, but—I—well, I think she must be sick or something the way she writes. Don't say much aside from quoting the Scriptures and saying nothing else about Ruth-Rachel or how they're getting along. Stuff like 'Thou shalt not kill' or 'Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord' or 'The Lord shall destroy the evil-doer, the wicked sinners.' You know, the kind of

stuff they used to paint on rocks and fences back home. Not a damn word about Ruth-Rachel or the baby."

Luther looked up quickly in surprise. "Baby? You never said anything— You and Ruth-Rachel got a baby?"

"Sure have," Dale grinned. "A boy. You remember that time we went home on furlough from Benning in '42—no, that was when you got sick and went to the hospital—well, that's when I found out she was pregnant. That's why I was so glad I'd got her to move in with Ma. Ruth-Rachel, she's a kid about a lot of things, like taking care of herself or handling money, so I was lucky I had Ma to look after her. I know they don't get along too good, but I figure they'd get along better because she'd be company for Ma with me gone. Besides, Ma can help with the baby."

Luther fell silent, thinking of Bethann, wishing he were able to talk to Dale about her and Harriet, just as Dale could talk to him about Ruth-Rachel and their son; but this, under the circumstances, was impossible. How many times, he wondered now, had he wished he could write to Bethann, ask for a picture of her and Harriet. And he wondered, too, how it would be when he returned to give his daughter her true name by marrying Bethann. He heard Dale's voice coming through to him, penetrating his small, snatched-at dream.

"Luther, if you want to change your mind about—this patrol—I can get a replacement for you. Or drop one man from it. The way it is, we've got thirteen and I could drop you just for luck."

Luther squirmed uncomfortably, frowning as he turned to face Dale. "Don't do it, Dale. Please You get me a replacement and I'll get myself laughed at all the way to Berlin. Big Tiddy and Paul—"

"Okay, boy," Dale replied, slapping Luther's shoulder. "Just you remember one thing. Stay close to me, you hear?"

"Sure, Dale. Don't worry about that. I won't scare off any of your game. I'll stick to you like a mustard plaster."

Dale checked his watch. "Fifteen minutes. Time for another smoke." He pulled his pack of cigarettes out and Luther took one.

"I sure am glad to be back in my own outfit, Dale," Luther said.

Dale smiled. "Well, you ain't exactly back *in* it yet, Luther boy. You just joined *up* with it again, and you won't be *in* it till you get beat up in it, eat dirt and mud in it, get the hell kicked out of you in it, and take the dirty end of the stick with it. Then, I guess, you'll be *in* it. Just you take it easy. It'll come naturally. The boys don't like replacements sharing their aches and pains and wounds

and other assorted gripes and miseries. You can't even bring your own in with you from another outfit. You got to get 'em here, with us."

Luther said, "I know how it is, all right. Being a replacement's been my whole history in this war, ever since I got left behind in '42. Seems like you take a dead man's place, every buddy he's got starts acting like you're the one who killed him."

Dale checked his watch. "Let's get with it. Almost time for the jumpoff. There comes Crawford with the truck now."

They rejoined the group as Crawford, meticulously outfitted, came up, asked of Hagen, "All present, Sergeant?"

Dale ran his eyes over the standing group. "All present and ready to go, Lieutenant."

"Good. Now let's split the men into two groups just in case we want to send one group out apart from the other. It's easier to do now than it will be later in the dark."

"Sure," Dale agreed laconically with the unnecessary suggestion. He turned to the group and in his crispest, most efficient tone began to divide them. "Lieutenant Crawford will be in charge," he announced. "First unit, Hagen, Katz, Luftin, Trippe, Clark, and Dorman. Second unit, Rupertus, Tennant, Galliano, Bender, Karylios, and Page."

Crawford smiled uneasily and reminded him, "Thirteen, Sergeant. Aren't you superstitious?"

Dale smiled mockingly in return. "Now who ever heard of a superstitious Irishman?" he asked. "Especially on St. Patrick's Day."

Crawford said briskly, "Okay, Hagen. Let's hit it."

At that moment it began to rain again.

9.

At the point where the main road entered the forest, darkness closed in and enveloped them. The truck had crept slowly through six miles of heavy ground fog and rain over an ice-coated road, dropped them within what the driver had guessed was 200 yards of the forest, but later turned out to be a good 600 yards. The footing on the road was treacherous and Hagen led them off the hard surface onto the stubbled ground to the east where the going was more sure-footed. On both sides of the road snow lay in frozen, crusted patches, pockmarked by the heavy rain of the past week. The air was cold and the rising wind whipped overhead as it sent the heavy black clouds skittering above them at treetop height.

When they reached the fog-shrouded woods, Hagen gave the signal and the men spread out, began to move eastward and northward in slow, careful steps, each man trying to maintain visual contact with the ghostlike figure on either side of him. Crawford and Hagen walked side by side in advance of the line, Luther directly behind them. Rupertus and Clark were the flanking scouts.

The woods were quiet except for the dripping rain and the noises made by themselves. They moved along cautiously, with the nervous grimness of men who had often seen sudden, violent, unexpected death erupt and could not, had they wanted, simulate other than a healthy respect for the unknown, unseen before them.

Three hundred yards east of the main road Hagen signaled for a halt while he discussed their next move with Crawford. They turned due north. An hour passed and so far, gratefully, all was quiet. No mines, no snipers. They were more aware of the latter than the former since it would have been incredible to expect the Germans to have sown the entire woods with Teller or shoe mines. Yet they were cautious, knew better than to assume their good luck could last forever. Up ahead, each man was deeply conscious, the enemy waited. Up ahead. Always up ahead. At some point the dice must come up with a seven.

The ground here rolled in slight rises, dipped into shallow valleys. Uphill and down. Up and down. Dangerous because one never knew when he would reach the top of such a rise and be shot down, and so there was the relief going down into the draw, the hesitancy on the way up the rise. The trees began to thin out and the thick fog seemed to roll ahead of them like billowing clouds, driven by a sharp wind that rustled eerily through the thick branches of fir overhead, whistling aloud and giving them some extra measure of protection against being heard by the enemy. The rain slackened off, but the cold wind increased its force and tore at them so that they could hear its muffled, persistent whining as it whipped past their parka-hooded ears, slashed and stabbed at them, probing at their protective clothing. The ground was soggy-wet and puddly with trapped water.

Even if they're out here, it's a million-to-one chance we can find 'em, Hagen thought. This stuff is thicker'n a Frenchman's pea soup and nothing comes thicker than that.

He turned to make a quick whispered check on the men. They were well spread out. He knew that the dark shadow directly behind him was Luther, keeping close as he had been told. Rupertus and Clark had come in to report. Dale hesitated, let Luther catch

up to him, gripped his arm and whispered, "Pass the word to close up on me. We'll take a breather here."

The word was passed and in another minute the men were formed in a small circle about Dale and Lieutenant Crawford. Dale signaled Rupertus and Crawford to one side.

"We're not getting anywhere like this," Dale said. "We're too many to move as fast as we should."

Crawford: "What would you suggest, Hagen?"

Dale: "Rupe, what do you think?"

Rupertus: "I'm with you, Dale. It's too damned slow like this. We'll be in here 'way past daybreak if we don't get a move on."

Crawford, anxiously now: "What would you suggest?"

Dale: "Rupe, how about you take one man and go ahead faster on recon? If you run across anything, send your man back with the word and hold your position until we can come up and look it over. We'll keep moving up on this same line so your boy won't have any trouble finding us."

Rupertus: "Sounds okay to me."

Crawford remained silent.

Dale: "Lieutenant? How's it sound to you?"

Crawford: "It sounds—okay—okay."

Dale: "That's it, Rupe. Pick your boy and move up. Same pass-word coming back."

Rupertus: "Okay. I'll take Galliano."

At 2015 the rain began to fall again, sifting through the trees, reducing visibility to a minimum, raising discomfort to a new high level. The men instinctively drew in closer together, and Hagen and Crawford, for the security of knowing they were not alone, took occasional breaks under the protection of a thick stand of trees; but there was little profit in this. Cold, cold, cold, Hagen thought. It was so cold it drove any memory of the warmth of home, of African deserts, of Southern Italy out of his mind. It was as though he had never known a time when he was other than freezing cold.

His impatience had swelled in the hour and fifteen minutes that had passed since Rupertus and Galliano moved up on reconnaissance. The men stood about miserably, weapons tucked under their parkas. Katz shielded his handie-talkie, brought it out occasionally to check it, but it was useless to them since they were already beyond effective communication range with this small instrument; yet he kept testing, hoping to find that Charlie or Dog Companies might be

near enough to pick him up. So far there had been no contact.

The men were growing restless, eager to be moving up or back, preferably the latter. Waiting was brutal on the nerves, standing around like pigeons—near-frozen pigeons—unable to smoke or converse, huddled close to the tree trunks to fend off the rain; but nothing could offset the cold wind. And so they stood mutely and numbly, playing at war's most universal and disagreeable game: waiting.

At 2045 they heard Luftin throw the challenge, a soft, birdlike whistle. The reply came quickly, "St. Patrick." It was Galliano.

Luftin, quietly: "Okay, *paisano*. Come on in. The party's already started. All the gals askin' for you."

Galliano: "Thanks, linthead. Put an extra plate on and get another broad. We got company."

"Come on, come on. Bring him in. We been—"

Hagen moved hurriedly into the exchange, his blue-shielded flashlight snapped on, directed at the German sandwiched between Galliano and Rupertus. "Good boy, Rupe. Any score yet?"

"Just one to nothing, first inning. We got him about a mile north of here. Couldn't get anything out of him so we tied and gagged him and brought him back for a little talk with Katz."

"Well, now, ain't that just dandy? What the hell was he doing out there in the nice, warm sunshine? Takin' a sun bath?"

The two men spoke banteringly, in restrained jubilation. If the prisoner could be made to talk, he could easily cut their night's work by a matter of hours.

"No. He was just walkin' around up there. We could've nailed one a lot sooner, but we figured he was a sentry of some kind even if we couldn't see what the hell he was guarding. Not too smart, the first one. He lit a cigarette and Galliano caught a flash of it. I guess he figured only squareheads are dumb enough to be out in the rain like this.

"Anyway, we waited to see what the hell he was guarding over there. We couldn't even see him in the dark, just heard his boots crunching in the ground. We waited for near a half hour and we're ready to circle around and go in after him when two more krauts come stompin' up. They talk for a minute and this one relieves the first one. This kraut takes a walk around and damn near steps on Galliano, so I give the word and we nailed him. He won't be missed till his relief comes lookin' for him. We got at least an hour if they stand two-hour watches."

"Okay," Hagen said swiftly, "let's get to work on him."

Crawford stood on the inner edge of the circle, taking no more than a silent, however intent, interest in what was happening, in awe of the huge German who stood silently, a handkerchief bound behind his head and running through his mouth, hands tied behind him: the Enemy at last, and so close to him. Rupertus shook some of the water from his parka. "You guys are nuts standing around here in the rain. A coupla hundred yards up from here, there's a woodcutter's shack, big enough to hold about five or six guys. Woodcutters use 'em for warming shacks in the winter. Got a little iron job inside for a fire, even. We ran across a couple of them on the way. Let's take this joker up there and put a light on him. He's got some kind of markings on him, so I guess he's more than a plain *soldat*."

Hagen snapped off the blue light. "Okay, Rupe, you lead the way. Everybody else close up. We're moving up to that woodcutter's shack. Keep tight."

They found the shack, a small but sturdy building that, as Rupertus had indicated, could hold several men comfortably. Hagen, Crawford, Rupertus, and the prisoner went inside. Hagen stripped the blue shield off his flashlight and threw the bright yellow light on the prisoner. In his eyes they could see the pure fright for these hooded, black-faced men. Rupertus cut the bonds loose and removed the gag, then motioned the man to get out of his overcoat and poncho. Hagen went to the door and called softly, "Katz!"

"Yol!" Morrie Katz came to the front and went inside the shack. With five men inside, they were standing at close quarters.

"Okay, Morrie," Dale said, "let's find out a few things."

"Sure thing, Dale." To the German he said, "*Welchen Rang haben Sie?*"

No reply. Again, "*Welchen Rang haben Sie?*" What is your rank?

No reply.

Katz: "*Wie heissen Sie?*" What is your name?

No reply.

Katz: "Stubborn bastard."

Rupertus nudged Katz to one side gently. He raised his open hand and slapped the German hard across the face. The man flinched and drew back, but Hagen, standing behind him, pushed him forward toward Rupertus, who brought the back of his hand up and struck the German again.

Rupertus: "Ask him once more, Morrie."

Katz: "*Ich mochte Ihnen ein paar Fragen stellen.*" I want to ask you some questions.

There was no indication from the German that he had heard the words. Rupertus grabbed the German's jacket with his left hand and drove his fist into the bulging abdomen.

"Sergeant!" It was Crawford. Rupertus looked toward him, lips pursed tightly, but did not reply.

"Sergeant," Crawford said, "I can't permit this sort of thing. This brutality only breeds—"

"Lieutenant." Dale was speaking now.

"What is it, Hagen?" His voice was sharp with authority now.

"Lieutenant, we're a little too crowded for comfort in here. I need Rupertus and Katz in here with me. Would you mind stepping outside for a little while?"

Crawford: "Sergeant, I will not—"

Hagen: "Lieutenant, I'm afraid we need the room."

Crawford: "Hagen, I will not be a party to—"

Hagen: "That's why I'm asking you to step outside, Lieutenant. We got work to do, information Captain Wentworth, Battalion, Regiment, and Division need, and need mighty damn bad."

Crawford: "I can't condone brutality to a prisoner of war."

Hagen: "Okay, Lieutenant, then suppose you take over. Rupertus and I will go outside and wait for you to get the information for us. When you get it, we'll go back and report it to Captain Wentworth. Let's go, Rupe."

Crawford: "Wait, Hagen. Wait."

Dale: "Lieutenant, we got work to do." The words were spoken gently, quietly, but there was a quality of sharpness and impatience in them. "If you object to a little—uh—persuasion, we can't get what we came to get. I can tell you just one thing. Coming across France, we got plenty of samples of how the krauts used our boys. And then left them dead for us to find. At least this guy might live through it if he talks."

Crawford turned and went to the door. Without looking around, he said, "All right, Hagen. But remember that I'll include this in my report to Captain Wentworth."

Dale said, "You be sure to do that, Lieutenant."

Crawford went outside. From behind the prisoner, Dale shook his head sadly. "Okay, Rupe."

Rupertus: "Once more, Morrie."

"Okay." Katz faced the sullen German again. "*Wir sind ameri-*"

kanische Soldaten. Verstehen Sie? Ich mochte Ihnen ein paar Fragen stellen. Sagen Sie die Wahrheit. Es wird Ihnen nichts geschen."

No reply.

Rupertus threw two hard punches into the German's belly. His knees buckled and the air in his lungs expelled with a sharp, painful gasp.

"Hold it!" Hagen called. He handed the flashlight to Katz. "We're wasting too much time with this son-of-a-bitch. Put the light on him."

He reached down to the leather sheath that was tied to his right leg and withdrew the knife from it, held the blade so that the light shone on its gleaming, wicked blade.

Hagen: "Hold him, Rupe." Rupertus moved around in back of the man and twisted his arms behind him and upward. The German gasped in sudden pain.

Hagen: "Ask the bastard if he can talk." Dale was holding the point of the knife against him, touching the fabric of his jacket about an inch above the buckle.

Katz: "*Können Sie sprechen?*"

The German, faintly: "*Ja.*" Yes.

Katz: "*Welchen Rang haben Sie?*" What is your rank?

The German: "*Ich bin eine Obergefreiter.*"

Katz: "*Welches ist Ihr Truppenteil?*"

The German: "*Panzertruppe.*"

Katz: "*Wo sind Ihr Freunde? Sind Sie hier in der Nahe?*"

No reply.

Katz, to Hager: "This guy is a corporal in the armored command and he won't tell where his buddies are."

Rupertus: "Once more. Ask him how many men are in his unit."

Katz: "*Wievell Mann sind in Ihrer Einheit?*"

No reply.

Rupertus tightened his grip on the man's arms, drew him backward off balance. Hagen dropped the knife about eight or ten inches below the German's middle, to a point just over his groin. With a swift motion downward, he ripped the man's trousers open, tore the cloth away, took a grip on the long, woolen underwear and slashed an opening in them, exposing the man's most intimate nakedness. He touched the blade of the knife to the German's cold, shrunken flesh—

"*Ich gehe nach spreche—!*" he cried out in a terrified, piercing screech.

Katz: "Okay, Dale. You own him. He'll talk now."

Rupertus loosened his hold on the German, but Dale stood close at his side, the knife menacingly in his hand, held higher in the light now so the man could keep his eyes on the blade. Katz began again.

"*Welches ist Ihre Einheit?*" What is your outfit?

The words came now, first in short spurts, then in a flood. Katz was asking the questions with lightning rapidity, taking advantage of the momentary willingness of the prisoner, or fright of the consequences, that were fresh in his mind. The answers came with little hesitation, frequently offering more than had been asked of him. Hagen and Rupertus hung onto every word, able to recognize a phrase here and there. After a while Hagen said, "Hold it for a minute, Morrie. Give it to us so far."

"Okay," Katz said. "Up ahead, where you picked him up, there's a machine-gun emplacement. Reason you couldn't see it, Rupe, it's dug into a little side road down in the gully. The road is used by woodcutters around here, about 600 yards east of the main road, just about where you found him. He was starting a two-hour watch when he was grabbed. The emplacement is camouflaged with fir branches and there's a fifty-caliber gun in there with four men. This joker had just been sent up for his watch by the *Oberfeld webel*."

Dale: "What the hell are they doing out there with just one emplacement? Or are there any more? And if so, how many?"

Katz went on with the questioning, first handing the German a cigarette, lighting it for him. There was some reluctance in the man to continue, as though the interruption had broken the chain of his willingness to cooperate; but this vanished when Hagen made another threatening move with the knife. The conversation began flowing smoothly now, then burst forth from the man in a steady stream.

Suddenly Katz came alert. "*Sprechen Sie langsam*," he ordered, unwilling to miss any of what was being said. The German took a deep drag on the cigarette and began to speak slower. Hagen noticed the change of pace. "What's happening, Morrie?" he asked.

Katz, to Hagen: "Hold it, Dale. Something bigger." He went back to questioning the German and a few moments later turned to the two sergeants. "Holy Moses. If he's telling the truth, this could be something."

Rupertus, alert: "What?"

Katz: "I'll give it to you the best I know how. Up this same side road, east of where the machine-gun emplacement is dug in,

maybe a couple thousand yards, is a *Panzerkampfwagen*, a god-damned tank."

"Ask him what else is up there and what's it up there for."

Katz spoke to the prisoner, but he offered little more beyond a shrug and denial.

Hagen: "What's the score, Morrie?"

Katz: "He says he doesn't know. Farther up the line, north of this setup he's already spilled his guts about, he thinks there could be more setups just like this one. A machine-gun nest and a tank to backstop it. That's all he knows about it."

Rupertus: "You think he's holding back, Morrie? If he is, I'll cut the—"

Katz: "I don't think so, Rupe. He's too damned scared of that knife to hold back now, after all he's told us. He wants to know if we're going to kill him now."

Hagen snorted. "Tell him no. We're going to tie him up and leave him in this shack out of the rain. When we're finished, we'll come back and take him with us. But if he's lying about that nest and tank, he'll never make it."

Katz relayed the word to the German who replied swiftly, excitedly.

Katz: "He says it's okay with him. He knows they've lost the war. He'll wait quietly while we check it out. All he wants to do is get home to his wife and kids."

Outside the warming shack Lieutenant Crawford stood apart from the other men. Dale went to him and reported what they had learned.

"And the prisoner?" Crawford asked.

"He's okay. We left him tied up until we get back and take him in with us."

"Are you sure he's—?"

Impatiently, "Lieutenant, listen. If you don't believe me, you can go in there and see him for yourself. We'd better get on the ball and find out what the hell's what instead of wasting time worrying about one lousy kraut who'd cut your liver out without thinking twice about it, prisoner or not."

Crawford stood quietly angry at Hagen's words for a moment, then said, "All right. Let's take the word back to the captain."

"What word? You going to take that kraut's word without checking it out? If he's telling the truth, we can check it easy enough.

Now it's up to us to find out which way he rolled the dice before we check out of the game."

Rupertus came out of the shack and joined them. "What's the score, Dale?" he asked, ignoring the lieutenant.

"The way I figure it," Dale said, "we'll have to check the kraut's story out, seeing it's the only one we've got. I'll take one man with me and check out the tank thing. Rupe, you take four men up with you and check out that machine-gun nest. If this guy's telling the truth, they'll be sending a relief for him in about—" he checked his watch— "forty-five or fifty minutes. Can you get back there by then?"

Rupertus: "No sweat."

Hagen: "If they find he's missing, they'll probably go looking for him. Watch it. Don't jump unless they jump you first."

Rupertus: "We'll have the edge of 'em, Dale. We know they're there. They don't know about us yet."

Hagen: "Okay. Pick four men and move up. Leave Galliano in case the lieutenant needs to get to you. I'll take Dorman and check on the tank." Rupertus was already moving away, choosing the men who would accompany him. Hagen, feeling the need to smooth Crawford's ruffled feelings, spoke to him now. "The way it looks to me, Lieutenant, unless that kraut is lying his head off, they've got that side road camouflaged so it can't be seen from the main road. Back about 600 yards is that machine-gun nest. A couple thousand yards east of that is a tank. Farther up north they could have the same kind of a deal going for them. Beyond that, maybe another one, maybe a few more. Now, let's say our main body comes barreling through these woods tomorrow, past this first side road. Soon as we're all past it, the tank comes down and straddles the road with his snout pointing at our tails. The machine-gun crew moves down with the tank to help out.

"Up ahead, they get the word by radio and jump us, start blasting away with some heavier stuff. We're caught in a surprise squeeze and they plaster us at the head and middle of our column while these guys lay back to cut off any retreat. We're up the creek in a leaky canoe and the krauts got all the paddles."

"And you don't think we should send word of this back?" Crawford asked.

"It's only guesswork on my part, Lieutenant. The captain'd have our heads for anything less than proof. I'm going out to see if I can locate that tank. If I find it, we'll know what the score is. If there's

nothing there, well, that's something else and we'll have to get up to Rupertus and find out what's there."

Crawford said, "Suppose I go along with you."

Hagen: "No, Lieutenant. I'm taking one runner with me just in case I need to send word back to you. Rupertus is taking four men. I'm taking one. You wait here with the other five men to see which one of us needs you first. If Rupe runs into something, you'll probably be able to hear the firing from here in all this quiet. Then you can move up and support him. Galliano can show you the way."

Crawford hesitated, said with what sounded like true disappointment, "All right, Hagen."

Dale said, "I'll try to get back as soon as I can. Take it easy, Lieutenant. Why don't you move the men inside the shack and keep out of the cold? You could let them smoke inside there. It's better than being outside—"

Crawford turned on him and walked toward the shack. Dale went to the group of men, singled Luther out. "Okay, Dorman, you and me. We're moving out."

10.

They had been out a little more than forty minutes when they came up out of a rolling valley toward a steep rise. The mist lay below the ridge, hugging the gully. Dale motioned Luther up beside him, put his lips to Luther's ear beneath the parka hood.

"A little up ahead could be the side road we're looking for. We'll go up slow and easy. Me first. I'll signal you. When I do, crawl up the last few feet. Don't let your head stick up above the ridge. It's clear up there and somebody might be watching that ridge for movement."

Luther nodded, his lips suddenly going dry. His tongue flicked out nervously to wet them, watched as Dale disappeared against the dark hillside, eyes glued to the spot at the top of the rise that Dale had indicated would be their goal. The rise was out in the clear, away from any of the trees, in the open with the rain pouring down on it. Luther could make out no distinguishing signs from Dale and so he waited a full five minutes and then crawled up the steep hillside. He eased up to within a foot of the ridge and almost leaped up when he felt a hand reach out and touch him. It was Dale's, guiding him a few feet to the right where the two huddled closely together on the wet ground.

"Anything?" Luther whispered.

"Jesus, yeah. That kraut wasn't lying one bit. Down in this next

gully is the side road and straddling it is a Tiger tank with his goddamned snout pointing down the alley toward the main road. It's sitting down there camouflaged behind a wall of fir brush. Couldn't be spotted from the front in a month of Sundays."

"Anybody around?" Luther asked, his mouth gone dry again.

"So far I spotted only one sentry on the far side. I think he's over in the woods trying to keep out of the rain."

Dale began to move slowly toward the top of the ridge. He stopped, peered over the crest, and motioned Luther up beside him. A silent horror came over Luther as he made out the black, blocky lines of the Tiger, formidable as a fortress, rakishly daring, the barrel of its heavy gun thrust defiantly in the direction of the main road.

"Just like a goddamned bowling alley," Dale whispered. "What the machine gun can't get, the Tiger will."

Luther was silent, a sudden painful discomfort at the pit of his stomach, unable to understand why, yet identifying it with what he saw lying there before them. Dale was still speaking into his ear, more to outline his own thoughts to himself than to be informative for Luther's benefit. And then Luther was aware that Dale was speaking directly to him.

"You know what could bust this whole thing wide open, Luther? Throw a monkey wrench right inside Old Man Ronstadt's German works? Christ, if we could pull this off, the whole buggered game would blow up right smack in their faces!"

Without waiting for a reply, Dale continued, "If we could get that tank, knock it out, the whole show would be over. Up ahead, they'd know we knew all about what they're planning for us and have to start running again. Except that this time we'd nail 'em good because they've lost a lot of time setting this thing up. How about that, Luther? We could practically wreck that kraut general's Sunday dinner for him."

The higher key of Dale's voice frightened Luther. "I thought we were supposed to bring back the information to Captain Wentworth," he said.

"Sure. But he never expected a setup like this. Figure it out for yourself. If we go back and just report what we found, we'll be held up another three or four days until we can bring in enough stuff to surround the whole goddamned Grünwald before we can move in on 'em. This way, we can get one tank and they got to write the whole thing off as a misdeal. And we'll be sitting that much closer on top of 'em. Hell," he chortled gleefully, "we could even come out of this with a Bronze Star. How about that, Luther?"

But Luther was not happy with the thought of two men trying to knock out a tank by themselves. Not for all the Bronze Stars in the world.

"How about we get court-martialed for disobeying orders?" Luther asked.

"Court-martial, hell. I'll bet Wentworth or Greer or Bettancourt or any of the rest of them would take a shot at it. Christ, Luther, I think it could work."

"How do you figure—to—go about—it?" Luther asked.

"Take it easy for a minute. Relax. Let me think."

The five men sat on the floor in the woodcutter's warming shack, backs to the walls, happy to be out of the cold rain and wind, permitted to smoke. There was no fire for warmth, but being under a roof was far more than they had expected. On the floor lay a flashlight, placed there by Karylios, its yellow beam throwing a path of light on the prisoner who lay quietly on the floor. Crawford stood with his back leaning against the door. Four small dots of red identified the cigarette smoke's.

Crawford broke the silence. "I'm going outside. I don't want anybody to leave. I'll be back in a few minutes."

No one replied. The lieutenant went outside and began to pace back and forth in front of the shack, splashing through the small pools of water that had collected.

Oh, God, he prayed, what am I doing out here like this? What do I know about war and man's need to kill off his fellow man? I didn't ask for this. They drafted me and sent me to OCS because I was a law student with a high IQ. I didn't want it then and I don't want it now. What I wouldn't give for just five minutes with Joyce back in Birmingham. Just to tell her what a damned fool I was. Why in the name of God didn't I marry her when I had the chance?

He checked his watch. 2110. Where was Hagen? What was keeping him? Were Rupertus and Page and Luftin and Katz and Bender still alive? He paced up and down once more, feeling the need for physical action, even though he was unsure of what course the action should take. Almost anything was better than waiting—waiting for something to happen, waiting for Death, the only infallible Hunter from whom no prey escapes.

11.

Directly north and slightly east of the woodcutter's shack, Rupertus held out his left arm. Bender came up, touched it, stopped, then

held his own left arm out. Luftin, Katz, and Page, each in turn, were similarly halted and drew into a tight circle around Rupertus.

"Easy does it," Rupertus said. "We picked up the kraut about sixty yards ahead, on top of that wooded knoll. From what he said, the machine gun must be planted down on the other side of it where the woodcutter's road should be. If he was lying about his two-hour watch, they could be out looking for him. Or the guys who got him. So take it easy and don't bunch up. If they hit us, I want you, Bender, to get back to that shack as fast as possible and let the lieutenant know. Or Hagen if he's back."

He paused for a breath. "Okay now. We're going to move up. Spread out behind and on both sides of me. For Christ's sake don't make a noise louder'n the rain or we're all dead ducks. Okay, let's move up."

The men nodded and Rupertus took the lead. They moved up cautiously, taking seemingly endless time with each yard of advance. They crouched low as they moved up the incline, taut, alert, expectant, into the black unknown.

Five yards below the top of the knoll, Charlie Page had the misfortune to discover the first "shoe" mine, the small, yellow horror designed to blow off a man's foot or leg. It ripped through Page's leg just below the knee, meanwhile mangling his foot, almost severing it, but other pieces of the metal had entered his upper body and Page was dead before he could fall to the ground.

"Pull him back," Rupertus called. Luftin and Katz were bent over the fallen man. In the quiet that followed they could hear the sharp guttural calls coming up from the gully on the far side of the knoll.

Katz and Bender came up beside Rupertus who was lying on the ground, pulling at his grenades. Katz said, "He's dead."

Rupertus: "We uncovered the snake pit with that mine. They're down there below us. Grenades."

Both men rolled over on their sides, tore their gloves off to make it easier to find the zipper thongs. Luftin came up now, bent over in a low crouch, a grenade already in his hand. The voices from below had ceased as quickly as they had begun.

"Hold it," Rupertus cautioned. "Bender, Katz, let's us creep up to the top of the ridge. Luftin, cover us. Watch if anybody sticks his head up over the crest. Be ready to pull the pins on those grenades as soon as we get to the top."

The four men began to inch up toward the crest. Less than half a minute and they would know the full story of what lay before them;

but before they could reach the top, they heard the voices from behind them.

"Hände hoch! Keine bewegung!" Hands high! Don't move!

Rupertus, resignedly: "Okay, boys, freeze. That's it for now."

Now a second, more authoritative voice: *"Ruhe!"* Quiet! And over the voice the ominous, too familiar *click!* of a Schmeisser machine pistol.

Third voice: *"Wieviel sind es?"* How many are there?

First voice: *"Fünf. Einen ist tot!"* Five. One is dead.

Second voice: *"Aufstehen! Schnell!"* Stand up! Quickly!

Katz: "Stand up, guys. And watch it. They'll be looking for any little excuse—"

Katz took the jab of a rifle muzzle in his back and fell face down on the ground. The German stood back a few feet. Rupertus, Bender, and Luftin rose, turned around to face the three Germans, hands held high. Now Katz got up, wiping his face, then raising his hands over his head. The German with the Schmeisser stood a little in advance of the other two; dark, almost invisible figures in the darkness and rain, black ponchos covering them.

The two Germans behind the first one made a quick circle around the area, returned to stand on either side of the first man, holding a small conference.

Rupertus, in a whisper out of the side of his mouth to Katz: "Morrie, can you get any of it?"

Katz: "Nothing, Phil. Too far away."

Bender, a small note of hysteria showing: "I think they're going to give it to us. The way they did—"

Rupertus: "Maybe. Maybe not. These bastards—"

It was Henry Luftin who triggered the tragic action. Quickly, he dropped back into the darkness and threw himself on the ground, searching for the grenade he had left there when he stood up with the others. His right hand closed around it and he pulled the pin. The Schmeisser leaped to flaming life, raking across the three standing Americans, probing the dark for Luftin. Rupertus, Bender, and Katz went down, torn, dead. The grenade, its pin pulled, rolled out of Luftin's hand as he was hit in the throat and chest. His body fell on the grenade as it exploded, shielding the three Germans from harm.

The Germans examined the dead Americans, then marched down the far side of the knoll to the machine-gun emplacement to await what would come next.

Back on the ridge overlooking the tank, the faint reports of firing and the heavier detonation of a grenade floated back and brought Dale and Luther to a sharp alert. What the hell could have happened to start that going, Dale wondered.

The German sentry on the far side of the tank heard it as well and came out of his shelter in the woods and walked toward the tank. He stepped up on the treads and they could hear the clink of metal rapping against the turret top, saw it being raised and the dim outline of a man's helmeted head rise up out of it as he spoke sharply to the sentry. There was a discussion and then the turret top closed down on the tankman who disappeared below.

"The tanker was probably telling the sentry to keep a sharp eye out," Dale started to translate to Luther. "He—*watch it!* He's coming up on the ridge! Duck down and don't make a sound."

They could hear the sound of the man's boots as they came closer, slogging up toward the crest behind which they lay. Dale reached along his right thigh and withdrew the sharply honed knife from its sheath, held the blade up at an angle toward the ridge. The sound of the boots came closer. They saw the German helmet as it broke over the crest, then the body of the man as he reached the top of it and turned back toward the tank and peered forward in the direction from which the firing had come. The gesture was hopeless. He could see no more from the ridge than he had been able to see from below.

"*Ach—ah—h-h!*"

Luther heard the low gasp escape the German as he fell to the ground with Dale's knife stuck deeply into his back on the left side a few inches below his shoulder blade. Dale's free arm was wrapped around the sentry's mouth to prevent an outcry and now he pulled the man down, held his face in the mud until there was no sound or movement left in him.

"Luther, listen! I got it worked out now. I'm going down there and try to get that krauthead to come up out of the tank again. If anything goes wrong, you get back to Lieutenant Crawford and tell him what happened. Stay up here until you're sure I can't make it back, then get going. How many grenades do you got on you?"

"Four."

"Give me two of 'em. Quick. Get me something to tie these together, will you? Get something off the kraut."

Luther nervously turned the German over and ran his hands over the inert body. Beneath his rain-covering he found a lanyard looped around the man's neck, the other end snapped onto the butt of his pistol, a P-38. He cut it away with his own knife and passed it to Dale. Hagen had taken two of his own grenades and the two from Luther and was lashing the four together with the lanyard, bringing a loop over the top to form a handle by which to carry them. He was ready. He stood up, pulled the parka hood back off his head, and picked up the German's helmet, put it on. "Okay, Luther," he whispered, "keep your fingers crossed for me." With a burst of confidence he added, "I'll be back."

Luther could say nothing through his dry mouth. He watched grimly as Dale went down the soggy hill, sliding and slipping toward the tank, making no effort to hold the noise down. He reached the bottom, walked boldly to the tank, just as they had seen the sentry do it, climbed up on the tread, and rapped on the turret top with the butt of his .45. The top came up and the head and shoulders of the man appeared, his arms hooked over the rim of the turret edge. Dale fired the pistol into the man's face, let the .45 fall to one side as he reached for the pin of one of the four grenades. The German dropped back into the tank and Dale could hear the exclamations of anger and dismay from the others inside the belly of the monster. He released the handle of the grenade, dropped it into the turret opening, and slammed the top down. He jumped off the tread and ran toward the hill, counting the seconds as he ran. Suddenly he threw himself face down into the ground, instinctively shielding the back of his neck with his hands. At that same moment the first explosion ripped through the tank. The top of the turret was flung open by the inside pressure and a tall column of flame shot up into the air. There was another, sharper blast. The tank seemed to lift itself off the ground like a metal behemoth, then settled back at a crazy, disorderly angle. Smoke was pouring out of its vents and the open top.

Luther, frozen with horror at the sight, tried to imagine what was happening to the men inside the burning tank, and the thought of it made him nauseous. Against the dull red background he could see the tank lighted up in the darkness, saw the ghostlike figure of Dale as he got to his feet and ran up the hill toward him. "Come on, Dale!" he prayed. "Come on, boy!" He was looking at both the figure and the outline of the tank when the tank's arsenal went off. The heavy shells and machine-gun ammo exploded in multiple blasts and sent strong red tongues of flame and smoke licking through

every opening, through its split seams. When the last of the explosions had died away, Dale and Luther looked down the hill into the hollow. Flames still crackled inside the tank and its outer walls bulged shapelessly. The rear end of the steel monster had been blown out completely. Except for the acrid, stinking smoke, the flames popped and crackled with a startlingly familiar sound, like the sizzle of thick slices of bacon forked into a preheated iron skillet.

Dale broke into Luther's thoughts with a businesslike shake of his shoulder. "Okay, buddy, let's get the hell out of here. That's one tiger's tail got twisted out of action, by God! We did us a right proud night's work here. Let's get back and find out what all the shooting was back there. I hope Rupe and the others are okay."

Luther followed Dale down from the ridge as they headed back to the men they had left at the woodcutter's shack, and he could not help thinking that Dale had generously included him when he said, "We did us a right proud night's work here."

There was little doubt in his mind that by tomorrow he would be accepted by Ollie Tidwell and Paul Tullis and the others after they heard Dale's account of this action.

13.

The wind, coming down from the northeast, brought the dull reports of the firing with it, then the louder explosion of the grenade. Crawford, pacing outside the woodcutter's shack, was at once alert to the possibility that Rupertus had made contact with the enemy, and his first thought now was to support the small band of five men. He strode hurriedly back into the shack and called crisply, "Galliano!"

Joe Galliano stood up, zipping the parka up to his throat. The lieutenant turned and went outside again and Galliano followed him.

"Galliano, could you find Rupertus again?" Crawford asked.

Galliano: "Sure. What's up?" He peered through the darkness at the lieutenant's face, but could see nothing from under the helmet. It was the sharp change in the lieutenant's voice, the certain eagerness about it that puzzled Galliano.

"I just heard some firing from that direction." He pointed north and slightly east. "Rupertus must have stumbled across that machine-gun nest. If he did, he'll need help. Get the others out here and let's get started."

Galliano said with some doubt, "You sure, Lieutenant?"

Crawford replied testily, "I'm sure. I'm damned well sure. Now get the men out here. On the double."

Galliano: "How about the kraut?"

Crawford: "To hell with him. We've got much more important business to take care of with more than one German."

Galliano: "Okay, Lieutenant." He went inside the shack and came back with Tennant, Trippe, Karylios, and Clark. They stood slouching unhappily at the thought of moving anywhere without Rupertus or Hagen to lead them.

Crawford: "We're going up to find Rupertus."

Tennant: "Uh—didn't Hagen say—?"

Crawford, briskly: "We're moving up. Galliano will—"

Tennant, querulously: "Hagen said—"

Crawford, voice rising: "I know what Hagen said, Corporal. Now I'm saying it. We're moving up. At once."

Galliano, unhappily: "Yessir." He turned without another word and took the lead, heading north, Crawford beside him, the others following. They reached an open, treeless area where the rain drenched them and there were the muttered curses of a man who had stumbled and fallen, but they moved on quickly in an irregular column. Another thirty minutes and Galliano put a hand out. The men drew up and clustered around him.

"It's up ahead, maybe a hundred yards or so. Not much more. From here on in, take it quiet and easy. There's no telling what's up ahead if what the lieutenant heard was coming from here."

Crawford did not reply to this. Galliano took the lead again, feeling his way cautiously in the blackness of the wet night. In a shallow draw he halted again. "It's only a hop and a skip from here, over that next little ridge. I'll go up and see if I can find Rupe and the other guys."

Crawford patted Galliano's shoulder to indicate that he was in accord with the suggestion and Galliano moved up the rising slope. Crawford and the others took what little shelter they could find beneath two large fir trees, waiting. One of the men began to crunch the sodden earth, trying to work some circulation and feeling into his numb feet.

"*Stop it!*" Crawford hissed sharply. The man stopped and they stood motionless in the rain.

Galliano had disappeared into the darkness. Only two or three paces away, he had already become a part of the black earth and trees. He moved up over the rising crest, down into a small glade, then up again, a sense of the familiar beginning to reach him, tug

at his memory. He paused for a moment then, checking, then crept on. The side road he was searching for should be on the other side of the next hill, just beyond the thick stand of trees, the same woods in which he and Rupertus had hidden, from which they had trapped the German. He bore left to where the trees were thickest, secure in the knowledge that this was where he would in all likelihood find Rupertus and the others dug in.

He reached the top of the rise and was among the trees. Ten yards ahead of him was the crest and from there he would be able to look down the steep side of this hill into the side road where the German had indicated a machine-gun nest had been emplaced. He stooped in a low crouch and began to circle to his right. And then his hand, extended to guide him, touched something. Wet cloth. At once he had the answer. He lowered himself to the ground and crawled up beside the body.

"Rupe," he called in a soft whisper, knowing all the while that the effort was useless. There was no reply.

Galliano cried softly, helplessly, "Oh, Rupe. Goddamn them. God—"

The only reply to his words was the recognizable *click!* of a Schmeisser behind him. He squirmed around and rolled over and away from the body, but another body lay blocking his way. He rolled over again, thrashing anxiously to get to one of his grenades, but before he could get a hand under his zippered parka the triple flash of the machine pistol, brilliant and dazzling at this short range, blinded him. The noise of it racketed hollowly through the silent woods, repeating itself over and over again like an echo. Joe Galliano felt the *chunk! chunk!* of two blows to his body, like a meat cleaver sinking into a side of beef. He tried to raise himself to his knees, then fell over dead on his face.

At the sound of the firing Crawford snapped out, "*Let's go!*" and, with tommy gun extended before him, ran up the first slope and down into the glade. The men were caught unprepared by the suddenness of the order, knowing better than to run uphill into an almost certain trap. Carbines unslung, they followed Crawford's lead, spreading out, crouching low, cursing him for stupid recklessness. He had already reached the top of the rise and they saw his shadow against the slightly lighter sky as he dived for cover and opened fire. Tennant raced up the rise and dropped down beside him.

Crawford panted with some exultation in his voice, "I think I hit him. I heard him fall and call out."

Tennant: "For Christ's sake, Lieutenant, knock it off! All you're doing is telling them where we are. Hold it, *willya?*"

Crawford lowered the tommy gun. The other men had come up now, lay on both sides of the lieutenant and Tennant. For a moment all was quiet and then they could hear the German voices from below

"*Konrad! Was ist das?*" Konrad! What is it?

"*Aufpassen! Gefahr! Ich bin verwundet!*" Watch out! Danger! I am wounded!

"*Wo ist—?*" Where is—?

"*Deckung nehmen!*" Take cover!

"*Konrad! Wieviel sind es?*" Konrad! How many are there?

"*Mehrere! Ruhe!*" Several! Quiet!

Karylios had unhooked a grenade, pulled the pin, hurled it in an arc in the direction of the wounded man's voice. The explosion rocked the earth, and in the brief flash they had spotted the machine-gun nest, its camouflaged covering raised partly. The sharp violence of the grenade rocked the earth around them. All was darkness and quiet again. Then they heard the one small voice cry out.

"*Hel-fen—Sie—mir.*" Help me.

There was no reply to his cry for help. The black night and the rain took over.

"Tennant!" Crawford was whispering loudly

Karylios, beside him, said, "Kyle's looking things over."

"Get him up here."

"Okay."

In a few moments Karylios was back with Tennant, Trippe, and Clark.

Tennant: "Lieutenant—"

Crawford: "What?"

Tennant: "Rupe—the rest of—they're all dead. Luftin, Katz, Bender. And the dago. I mean Galliano."

Crawford: "All—dead? Where?"

Tennant: "Behind us in the trees. I couldn't find Page. They were gunned down with that firing you heard. I guess the krauts were waiting to see if anybody else would come looking."

Karylios: "Them goddamned murderin' kraut bastards!"

Crawford lay flat on the wet ground, his heart pounding while his mind churned through one indecision after another, battling the question of whether to suggest withdrawal, attack the nest with grenades from a point that would require moving up within closer

range, or what? He could not ask Tennant. Hagen or Rupertus, yes. But not Tennant. But it was Tennant who spoke now.

"Lieutenant."

Crawford: "What?"

"We got to pull back. Wait for Hagen."

Crawford, now emboldened by the suggestion from Corporal Tennant: "We'll wait right here."

Karylios: "Kyle's right, Lieutenant. We can't wait here."

Crawford: "We won't pull back. We'll wait. They're in a hole. We'll stick it out. See—what we—can do."

Tennant: "What do you *want* us to do?"

Crawford: "Let me think."

Karylios: "Only way is with grenades."

Crawford: "Wait—wait—"

And then below them the machine gun began sweeping the ridge in short, furious bursts. Two smaller automatic weapons were firing along with it. The men on the ridge pressed themselves into the ground, trying to burrow low.

Karylios: "Lieutenant." •

Crawford: "Wait—let me—think."

Clark: "Jesus Christ! What a lousy snafu!"

14.

The sound of the newest flurry of firing reached Dale and Luther as they plodded back toward the woodcutter's shack where they had left Crawford with Tennant, Galliano, Trippe, Karylios, and Clark. Dale pulled up short, tugged the hood of his parka back to hear better, heard the faint reports, then the grenade detonations.

"That's coming from where Rupe went to locate that kraut gun. If they haven't knocked it out by now, he needs help. Fast. Listen! I'm going to cut out and try to get to him from here. You go back and see if Crawford is still there. If he is, tell him I've gone ahead and that I said to move the men up. You got that?"

"Okay," Luther replied, but there was little he understood except that Dale was going to leave him here alone in the German forest. "Dale—let—me—" he began, but Dale was adding to his earlier instructions.

"Remember the password is 'St. Patrick.' The challenge is a short whistle. You get that challenge, throw it back fast or you'll get your head blown off. Get going and good luck. I'll see you later." Dale turned and disappeared into the dark.

Alone, Luther continued slowly in the direction of the shack. The firing had slackened off for a while, then picked up again. Now all was quiet. He stopped and leaned up against a tree, shaken by the fact that at any moment flying death from an unseen, unknown source could strike him, just as it had struck the German sentry Dale had stabbed, as it had struck the men inside that tank, flaming them to death. He began to tremble and this time knew it was cold fear.

Nothing he had ever experienced in his life, outside the Army or in it, had prepared him for actual combat experience. As close as he had come to it in training, later watching with a sense of horror the destruction it had left in its wake across Africa, Italy, and France, nothing could simulate the terrifying act of combat, even in this penultimate stage, the knowledge that somewhere ahead of him in the darkness, lying in wait for him, was Death. It was the most personal and desperately lonely moment of his entire life.

He shook himself and began to move again, slowly, unwillingly. The heavy ground mist surrounded him as though he were wrapped in a blanket, gave him the feeling that he was being followed; and so he turned from side to side and backwards with every few steps, to peer into the fog and darkness ahead and around him. He stumbled, fell over a tree trunk, cursed himself for a clumsy fool, lay still for a few moments wishing he did not have to get up and go on. But the need was greater than his own fear. He must find Lieutenant Crawford and get the rest of the men moved up to help Dale and Rupertus. He got up, went a yard or two, stepped into a watery hole, and fell again. He sat on the cold, soggy ground for a while, bewildered; tears of self-pity came to his eyes and he shook them aside. He wondered if he might smoke a cigarette in this dense blackness, but cast the thought out of his mind as quickly as it had entered. He stood up and the picture of the German sentry came back into his mind, the way his knees had buckled forward after the hard, fierce thrust of Dale's knife into his heart from behind, dying without knowing who or what had killed him, and then turning the dead man over, cutting the lanyard from him, handing it to Dale, who nonchalantly tied the four grenades together.

Luther felt a vile, acidic fluid come rushing into his mouth and he bent forward to let it run out onto the ground between his legs. The thin liquid became a thickened mass that forced its way up from the knot of pain he felt at the pit of his stomach. Then it was gone, the horrid-tasting mass, and the pain with it. He felt better, but weaker, and he found a stump and sat on it, head bent forward

over his lap. After a while his head began to clear. He stood up and began to walk steadily, one hand outstretched before him, blocking all other thoughts out of his mind except one: to get to the wood-cutter's shack and Lieutenant Crawford.

Within fifteen minutes he reached it. It stood among the trees, a black box against an even blacker background, and had he been three feet on either side of it, he would easily have missed it. He approached it carefully, aware that the men would be inside, guarding against anyone who approached it. He stood waiting for a moment, then moved cautiously up to the front step, leaned forward, and tapped his knuckles against the door. It pushed open without any resistance. "St. Patrick," he whispered.

There was no reply. "St. Patrick," he called softly.

They were gone. Crawford had no doubt heard the firing and moved the men up. He heaved a sigh of relief, walked into the shack, and closed the door. Then he heard the movement, like the scurrying of a rat, and he gasped with fright. It came again, and he reached under his parka into his trousers pocket for his flashlight, saw that the movement came from the bound and gagged German, whose eyes reflected the terror of his own frightening moment. Luther laid the flashlight down so both hands would be free. Here, alone with the bound prisoner, he felt some sort of responsibility or moral obligation toward him; or perhaps it was a feeling of guilt, since he could not, at the moment, hate or fear a man who lay trussed and gagged as this one; and perhaps it was the similar feeling of fear in both men that created a bond between them. He bent over the German and loosened the gag. The German cleared his throat, spat, and moved his head from side to side in relief. Luther helped him to sit up with his back to the wall, took a package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and lit two, put one between the German's lips.

They smoked in silence, captor and captive, eying each other with suspicious curiosity, the German's wrists tied behind his back, his ankles bound together. Ashes fell from the tip of his cigarette across his wet greatcoat, but he pulled deep draughts and expelled the smoke as though it would be his last cigarette.

Luther said, "Okay, Heinie-boy. That's my good deed for today." He reached over and took the cigarette from the German's mouth, stepped on it, replaced the gag in his mouth, and tied it tightly in place. He picked up the flashlight, then in a moment of mercy put it back on the floor so that the man would not be in total darkness. He went out of the shack and closed the door.

The sound of firing reached him, dull, faint reports. He knew now that he would have to move up. He could not stay here out of it and be found later on, asked to explain himself. He began to move northward. The sounds of the firing died away. A sense of deep loneliness, despair mingled with hopelessness, came over him. For a moment his fear was tinged with sudden anger against Dale for having left him here alone. Beneath his parka-covered helmet he could feel the cold sweat breaking out on his forehead and he cursed wildly under his breath.

So he had finally caught up with the war he had been chasing for over three years and knew now that this was what war was like. Fear. The same constant fear that, no matter what devices they used to hide it, chipped away at the men during their every conscious hour, knowing that the next hour or the next day or the one after, they would have to face up to the enemy, Germans. Darkness. Fear. Rifle and machine-gun bullets, grenades, the shell fire of heavy guns, mines, mortars, aerial bombs. This was what made the big difference between men like himself, like Crawford, who had never been under fire before, and the hardened veterans like Dale, Hank Luftin, Ollie Tidwell, and the others who had endured it before. Again and again. The same fright and horror to live over and over. This, he understood clearly now, was why the others resented newcomers, replacements.

He began to shiver with cold now and tried to warm himself by stepping out more vigorously, but the ground underfoot was treacherous and he continued to slip and stumble. He reached under his parka for his carbine, unslung the weapon, slipped the clip out, and tried its bolt action to see if it was still operable. It was. He shot the clip back into it, moved a cartridge into the firing chamber and the safety on. The rain slackened again and most of what now fell was dripping from the trees. He struck out again, unsure of his direction, moving north and east. If the action were not over, there would be more firing to guide him. If it were over and the machine-gun nest knocked out, it would make little difference, except that he must be sure not to be mistaken for a German. The ground was firmer under his feet now and he began to move along faster, keeping to the thicker part of the woods, using each tree as a shield, passing from behind one to the next.

Frequently, he stopped to listen, heard nothing, continued on. Suddenly there was an explosion. A grenade. Then the angry bursts from a machine gun. Another grenade. More bursts from the machine gun, the sound of it moving away, then coming back louder.

He knew the gunner was sweeping the gun in a circle, trying to locate the grenade throwers. The bursts stopped and he picked up the sound of the lighter weapons, then a BAR. Again the machine gun with its vicious, slapping bursts. The sound of the firing came from his left, west of where he stood, yet he continued to move north and east, above and away from the action. There was momentary quiet and then the machine gun chattered again, the sound of it seeming to come closer all the time. Luther stumbled, fell, cursed, and got up. He ran ahead and slipped again. All he knew was that somewhere to his left, and he could not know how far or close, was the machine gun. The probing, searching hand of Death.

The firing came to an end. Quiet and darkness again; the heavy mist that stroked him as he moved along gave him the feeling that a cold hand had been placed upon him, reaching to take him inside some misty, mysterious void. He ran ahead jerkily, up an incline, down into a gully. At the bottom of it was a muddy, rutty surface and he knew now that this was the same road the tank had straddled some two thousand yards east of here. The machine gun was to his left, dug into this same road. If he turned westward now, he would stumble over it. How far to the west, he did not know; only that it was there that Dale, Rupertus, Crawford, and the rest of them—those who were still alive, he thought grimly—were trying to knock it out and had so far been unsuccessful.

Luther stepped out into the muddy cart road, began to move west, slowly toward the sound of the firing, along the ruts, oblivious to the mud and pools of water he was sloshing through. The rain began to fall again, and here, in the open road, there was little protection from it; yet he was hardly aware of it. He slipped and fell, rose muddied and wet, carbine upraised out of the mud. He tucked it under his parka. The firing began again up ahead of him. He stopped, looking about him warily as though he expected to see the flashes of gunfire. It stopped and he moved along slowly. He moved over to the south side of the road, walking close to the bank for added safety. The road curved now, and he came around the bend of it and pulled up short. Even before he saw the flashes spurting, he had sensed the activity taking place; perhaps he had heard voices giving the order to fire. The machine-gun nest was ahead of him, some eighty or a hundred yards as best as he could guess at the distance. Up ahead, the air was clear, the ground mist gone. He was behind the nest, their backs to him as they fired toward the south, where Dale and the others must be spread out, trying to reach the Germans with their grenades, unable to come within effective throw-

ing range because of the continued sweeping bursts from the machine gun. A grenade was lobbed in and burst well in front of the nest. The machine gun responded. Luther could see several shadowy figures against the bursts. He was lying against the incline, hugging it, becoming a part of the earth itself, wondering what to do next: pull back out of it or—what?

Suddenly the air up ahead erupted with multiple explosions of small arms fire, grenades and the stern, authoritative staccato of the heavy machine gun. Four or five grenades exploded, then another, all falling short of their target. The machine gun responded with furious sweeps back and forth in a 180-degree circle. The outburst died down for a moment, and then he heard and saw one single, heavier explosion, more like a heavy bomb than a grenade. The brighter flash indicated that this one had come closer than the others, may actually have reached the nest; but he was too far away to tell. Darkness and quiet had taken over again, and then a sudden thought came to Luther.

Dale! *That was Dale!* The last explosion had been more than that of one grenade. Like the one that got the tank! Dale must have wired up a cluster of grenades, pulled up from the flank under covering fire, and thrown it into the nest!

He waited. Two, three, four minutes passed and again Luther became conscious of the numbing cold that enveloped him. Yet he made no move to action, fearful that the Germans up ahead were playing possum, waiting for any such move. He stood up and away from the bank, tried to wipe some of the heavy mud from his trousers and parka, but it was a useless effort in the rain. As he straightened up the pain returned to his stomach and again he felt the acidic spittle in his mouth, bent over and let it drip out onto the muddy road.

Oh, Jesus! he cried softly to himself, what's happened? Why don't somebody move? What do I do now? I'm scared, pure scared. I got to do something. Anything. I can't just stand here and freeze to death waiting for something to happen. I got to let Dale know I'm here. . . .

He hitched the carbine back on his right shoulder, freed one of his two remaining grenades, held it in his left hand. All right, he said to himself, let's move to hell up and see what's happened.

He came down the road as cautiously as he could, leaning against the incline, stepping easily in the mud and water to avoid splashing. He stopped to listen, crouched low to the ground, still clutching the

grenade, moved it to his right hand, his left held close so that he could pull the pin and let go if necessary. He heard a sudden harsh voice crying into his ear, "*Don't panic! Don't panic! Don't—!*" and for a split second he jerked his head around to see who it could be, realized then that it was his own silent voice, talking to himself. It was panic, he knew, a strange new panic that was cold and death-like. It thumped inside his chest, smashed into his brain, held him in a grip so firmly that he could barely move—or breathe. And above the racketing going on inside him, he could hear the voice again, repeating itself over and over, "*Don't panic! Don't panic! Don't—*"

Whether it was for a second or a minute or even five, he could not tell, but he knew he had blacked out and come back to wakefulness again. "Move, you crummy dogface!" he muttered. "Move, god-damn you! Get down there. Dale's counting on you. Joe Galliano, Hank Luftin, all the rest of them are counting on you. Move, you lousy—" But he stood still, cold and fearful with the knowledge that any move he made might be his last. The rain grew wilder with a sudden strong sweep of the wind, gusting about him so that he had to move to pull the hood closer around his face to keep from being blinded by it. Discomfort forced him to move. He stepped off another yard or two and waited, listening, could hear nothing but the wind and the rain pelting him. He bent over in a crouch along the incline where the earth was sodden but not as muddy as the dirt road. He was wet through and through now; the mud and water, having penetrated his parka and trousers, was beginning to run down inside his combat boots. He began to move along the south bank of the road, at a crawling pace, telling himself that no Germans were alive in the machine-gun nest, that the last grenade, or multiple grenade, had finished them off. But if this were so, he wondered dully, why hadn't Dale and the others rushed in and taken it over? Maybe the krauts were playing dead to sucker them down into a trap. Maybe Dale and Rupertus were playing dead to sucker the remaining krauts into a move of some kind that would expose them. He decided he would have to play it by ear; but he must do something soon; he couldn't take much more of this exposure. He tried to think the situation out but he was too conscious of the cold, the wet, the numbness creeping into his feet and legs. There was still the possibility, even if the nest had been silenced, that someone remained alive in there, perhaps wounded, but still alive and able to fire a rifle or pistol. And if the Germans were all

dead, there was still the danger of being shot by one of his own men who might be crawling up from the far side, just as he was crawling toward the nest from this side.

He wiped a glove across his face and felt the mud left there by the attempt. He crawled on again, pulling with elbows, pushing with his feet, holding the grenade tightly in his right hand. He stopped now to listen, heard nothing. Again a sense of panic assailed him. *He couldn't think of the password!* If Dale or Rupertus, any of them, were coming up to move into the nest and heard him, threw the challenge at him— It had something to do with the new replacement Dale wouldn't take out tonight. Kelly Moran. Something Irish, he recalled. Sure. It came back to him now. St. Patrick. He sighed with relief and began to inch forward. He stopped after another ten yards. He was close to it now. He caught the odor of something burning. Cloth, it smelled like. He couldn't be more than fifteen or twenty yards away from it. He started to crawl forward again, then heard the sound of something—or someone—moving. It came from directly ahead of him. *There was something alive in the nest!*

Luther put the grenade down on the wet earth. Quietly, he got his carbine unslung from his shoulder, pushed the safety off, held it ready to fire in the direction from which the sound came. He waited, heard nothing. A full three minutes passed. He raised himself on one elbow, saw a faint flash of light coming from below the rim of the nest. *There was somebody in it!* That was a flashlight moving about. He got up on one knee, raised his carbine—

Two flashes came out of the emplacement and Luther fell forward, splashing flat on his stomach, carbine extended, firing as fast as his finger could pull the trigger. He heard the quick, sucking gasp, heard the “ah-h-h-rr—” over the sound of his carbine.

“Up yours, you Heinie bastard!” Luther shouted involuntarily, needing to expel the pent-up breath in him. Once again all was silent blackness and he lay spent on the ground, sobbing softly to himself.

How long he lay gripping the carbine, he could not remember. He could not tell if he had fainted or if he had been in a daze, only that he was still here alone in the vast loneliness of the rain, the sad, mournful wind and the night that enveloped him. He thought first of Dale, wondering what had happened to him, where he could be, fearing that he along with the rest were dead, killed in the last furious exchange of machine-gun fire and grenades. He couldn't see his own hand in front of him, so dark was it, could not see the vapor when he exhaled. There was nothing left, he thought, no day, no

night; only Time. Time to lie here and think and wonder. His watch. He turned his wrist toward him, but could not make out the radium-tipped figures or hands against the dial. He touched it with his finger and the woolen threads of his muddied glove caught on the jagged edges of what was left of the broken glass.

He's not dead, he thought. Not Dale. He probably got there in time to pull them all back out of the way while he grenaded the Germans to death in their own nest.

Okay, then, he tried to reason, if that's what it is, where are they? They'd know the nest was knocked out and come ahead to check it. Where the hell were they, for Christ's sake?

Then, they're all dead. All of 'em. Dale, Rupe, Joe, Hank, the lieutenant, all of them. Okay. If that's it, what do I do now? Get out of this and try to go back? Where were the rest of Fox Company? Or Charlie or Dog Companies? Somebody should have heard the firing, shouldn't they? They'd know there was trouble, wouldn't they? Then where in hell were they? What kind of a loused-up deal was this, anyway?

I got to see what happened, he told himself. I can't leave here without knowing if they're all out there somewhere on the other side of that nest or if they pulled back after they knocked the nest out. I got to find out. I can't leave unless I do. If I get back they'll ask me all about what happened and I'll have to tell them.

He felt weighted down by the night, sweat-wet and muddied from the top of his helmeted head down inside his combat boots. The wind died down somewhat and the rain eased off, but the cold was as bitter and penetrating as it had been earlier. He began to stir, moving forward a few nervous feet at a time, crawling along the wet ground on his belly, hands extended before him, cradling the carbine across his arms. He felt the slight rise in the road, recalled from the earlier gun flashes that this led to the rim of the emplacement. He grew even more cautious now, feeling ahead of him for anything that might lay in his path. He crawled up the incline, hardly breathing as he reached what he knew must be the rim. His outstretched hand touched, then took hold of, something firm and cold; and with the feel of it, he knew that what he had grasped had been recently alive and human. A wrist, a hand, fingers. This must be the German he had killed with his carbine—the first and only life he had ever taken. Suddenly he was alive and intent with a horrible curiosity about this German he had shot; he wanted to see him, the man for whose death he was solely responsible. Death in war—the most impersonal of acts.

He waited, almost breathless with the growing excitement born in him. He waited, hoping he would hear someone from his own patrol, reminding himself that the password he must use was "St. Patrick." To tell them that it was all right, that he was one of them, and that all the Germans here were dead. That he had shot and killed the last one.

He waited. And no one came.

Now a sudden need for water drove all other thoughts out of his head. Even if it might mean his life, he wanted a drink of water for his parched throat. His hands searched under his parka, found his cartridge belt, searched for the canteen. It was gone. It had come loose from the belt. He reached out in front of him again, pulled himself along the rim of the crater, clutching at the dead German, hugging the ground. In the darkness he began searching the body for a canteen. He touched it now, unbuttoned and lifted the cloth flap, pulled the canteen out and unscrewed the cap. He raised it to his lips, and before he could drink from it, the thought struck him. *Jesus! It's an American canteen!* German canteens weren't— He groped for his flashlight, remembered that he had, in an act of mercy, left it with the German prisoner in the woodcutter's shack. He found his lighter, cupped one hand around it, flicked the cover back, and struck the sparking wheel with his right thumb. Thirst and earlier fears were forgotten for the moment. The light flared up within the curve of his palm.

The "German" he had killed was Dale Hagen. Technical Sergeant Dale Hagen.

The wind blew the light out. His hand fell away from it, knocked the canteen to the ground as the water, unwanted now, spilled over him and ran heedlessly into the already soaked earth.

15.

Luther shivered in the cold night. He was stiff and the movement was painful, yet the pain brought him out of his first deep shock. A full minute or two passed before he could recall where he was, what had happened up until the moment he had seen Dale's face grinning up at him in hideous death, one bullet hole through his forehead, one just below his right ear. He began a dry, tearless sobbing that shook him violently; he retched and was sick, vomiting to one side so it would not befoul his dead friend.

Oh, God, God, God! he cried to himself, what happened? What did I do? Jesus, I killed him. I killed the best friend I ever had. He was my neighbor. We worked together and joined the Army to-

gether. He married Ruth-Rachel Pierce, who I went to school with. He's the father of their boy. And I killed him. How do I go home and tell her that I killed her husband? My own friend. He's been through the worst beating a man can take for three years and I had to be the one to kill him. Oh, God, Jesus! Why didn't You let him kill ME instead? Why? I ain't nobody. He was a better man than me any day of the year.

Lutie Hagen, he thought, remembering the stories he had heard whispered around—that her husband had been killed in some kind of ruckus over another woman a few months before Dale was born. That her first son had run off at the age of sixteen, followed by her daughter a year later, and neither one ever heard from again. Now this. Her third child killed in a black forest in Germany by his own neighbor. His friend, Luther Dorman.

He got up and stood as straight as he could on both feet, angry, defiant, muddled gloved hands cupped to his mouth.

"Hey!"

He shouted the word sharply, loudly, without regard for caution or safety, inviting death.

"Hey!" he shouted again. *"Hey, you Heinie bastards, here I am! Come out and get me, you yellow-bellied krautheads!"*

He stood still on the rim of the crater, waiting for the barrage of bullets to cut him down; but there was only the rustle of the wind among the trees, and now, high above him in the clearing sky, he could see stars through a break in the clouds.

He shouted again. *"Hey!"*

Nothing stirred. No one answered him.

He sat down on the edge of the rim, his feet inside it, and rocked back and forth in silent grief. His hands went over Dale's uniform until he found the flashlight he knew should be hanging from the left side of his web pistol belt. He disengaged it, flashed its blue light around inside the wet, soggy crater, unable to see through the tears in his eyes. He ripped off the blue shield and the light was brighter, much better now. There were four dead Germans piled up in the bottom of the hole. The camouflaged roofing had been thrown back and out of the way and lay to one side. And there was Dale. And himself. The Germans had been cut and torn and ripped apart by the grenades. He bent down and reached into the crater, took the Luger out of the holster of one of the dead Germans, snapped off the flashlight, and sat there in the dark.

He began crying in his moment of desperation. *I got to do it, he told himself. I got to. It's the only way I can square myself with*

Dale, with Ruth-Rachel and their baby. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, just like the Bible says.

He remembered now. When I go back, what can I say? What can I tell them? When Captain Wentworth asks me, *Well, Dorman, what happened up there?* I won't even know how to tell him what happened. Then he's got to ask me, *And where the hell were you, Private Dorman, while all this was going on? How does it happen that out of thirteen men on that patrol, you're the only one to come walking back alive? And without so much as a single goddamn scratch on you? Well, how about it, Dorman? Come on, you no-good, lousy son-of-a-bitch, where were you? You're a deserter, Dorman, a goddamn deserter and a coward! And the penalty for cowardice and desertion while under fire is the firing squad!*

I'll get it anyway. They'll court-martial me and stand me up and shoot me the way they ought to. They ought to!

He thought of Carrie, then Bethann and Harriet whom he could see only as a white, fluffy, cloudlike image in Bethann's arms.

I'm sorry, Carrie. I'm sorry, Bethann. I hope you'll all forgive me. I'm sorry I won't be able to come back like I want to, like I should for little Harriet's sake. But I got to do what I got to do. I got to, else they'll do it to me.

He raised the Luger, turned it toward his chest, and squeezed the trigger. The force of the slug threw him back against the rim of the crater next to Dale and he felt as though someone had hit him with a heavy hammer. He began to slide downward toward the bottom of the crater among the dead Germans. Curiously, he felt no pain, only a numbness similar to that he had felt from the cold. But there was no cold now. He felt a tightness in his chest and little more. The Luger lay in his lap, his right hand still curled around its butt, index finger resting on the trigger. He tried, but found he didn't have the strength to lift it, aim it at his heart again. He pressed the trigger where it lay and the bullet entered his thigh at a point about ten inches above the knee. Still there was no pain. He pressed the trigger again and this time the slug entered his thigh about an inch above where the second bullet had lodged. His fingers loosened and the Luger fell out of his hand, slipped down between the bodies of the dead Germans. Luther slumped back, his head falling to one side.

Even now, when he should be feeling nothing, he knew that tears were rolling down his cheek. A few moments ago he had wanted desperately to die; and now, even as he felt the life running slowly out of him just as a handful of fine sand will spill out and sift

through loosely held fingers, he wanted to live—even if it meant he must face Captain Wentworth and a court-martial. He didn't want to die. He wanted to live, to go home and see Carrie and Bethann and Harriet. But he knew it was too late. He was dying.

His lips began to move. *Dear God*, he prayed. But the words were cut off even as they had begun.

Now everything was warm, peaceful blackness.

Chapter 9

1.

In the predawn chill, Corporal Paul Tullis carried an armload of wood to the fireplace in the farmhouse kitchen and stirred the dying embers into life, dumping the smaller branches on the few remaining sparks, blowing gently to encourage them to spring back into flaming life. From the next room came a grumpy, gruff, “—and get that goddamned fire going, somebody. It’s enough to freeze a man’s—grumble—brumble—mumble—”

Major Edgar Thorpe came out of the inside room into the kitchen, shrugging into his lined field jacket, carrying an interlined trench coat and woolen scarf over one arm. “Coffee going yet, Tullis?” he asked.

“Be ready in a minute, Major. *Jeez*, it’s cold! Funny, ain’t it? All the pictures I ever seen of Europe in them travel posters, books, and magazines, there’s never nothin’ but sun and sand and beach and the women with pract’illy no bathing suits on. Seems like we ain’t in Europe at all. No, sir. More like Alaska, and that’s a damn fact!”

The outside door opened and Lieutenant Harry Bledso entered. Tullis winced at the cold that swept indoors with him. “You better close that door quiet-like, Lieutenant,” he said. “The general ain’t had his java yet.” He motioned toward the coffeepot, pointed to a large cup. Bledso said, “Sure, man. I need that,” and Tullis poured a cup for him.

Thorpe smiled. “Good morning, my dear Longstreet. What word of the troops in the field?”

The lieutenant grimaced wryly, rubbing his hands to warm them, his face completely sober with apparent deep thought as he sipped the black coffee.

“Anything wrong, Harry?” Major Thorpe asked.

“Well,” Bledso said in soft, slow drawl, “if anything good can be said of it, we got him one.” He nodded toward the general’s room.

"Who got whom one what?" Thorpe asked, telescoping the multiple questions into one.

"The Old Man. We got him his hero. Not one of those posthumous jobs, either. This one's still alive and breathing. For the time being, anyway. But he's one hell of an expensive hero. It cost us something like a dozen men." He took another sip at the coffee and, before Thorpe could frame his question, said, "That patrol of Wentworth's got wiped out last night. Everybody gone except one man. They don't know for sure if he'll live through it."

"Jesus!" Thorpe exclaimed. Then, "How's the survivor? Able to kick?"

"Well, right at the moment, he isn't doing too much kicking, but Major Slocum thinks he may make it. He's got three slugs in him, two in his left thigh and one through the chest. Tipped the lung, Slocum thinks, but close enough to home plate to be called safe. If they can keep him from catching pneumonia or any other complications, we've got a hero on our hands. They're working every bit of medical witchcraft they know to keep him breathing."

"You mean a real, honest-to-God Medal of Honor hero?"

"They seem to think so down at the CP. Top grade, A-1 size."

"Twelve men." Thorpe shook his head. "We were talking about it just yesterday, saying how easy it was getting to be now that we were so much closer to—" He broke off suddenly. "What the hell happened? Does anybody know?"

"Well, here's the scoop, as much as I got and can give you," Bledso began. "I'd just got down to the command post when Slocum came rushing in to take care of the one they brought in. Wentworth, poor bastard, went out and damned near started banging his head against a tree. This patrol—"

Tullis asked quietly, "Who got it, Lieutenant?"

"Oh. Lieutenant Crawford. Rupertus. Hagen. That guitar-player, Trippe. Clark. Luftin. I can't remember all the rest by name."

"Jeez. Hagen. He was married just before the war broke out. Wife had a baby not long after. Luftin, his mother's a widow lady. Got a kid sister no more'n nine or ten years old. Jesus! Jesus Christ! And they keep tellin' us this goddamn lousy war is almost over."

"Take it easy, Tullis," said Bledso quietly.

"Who's the one they brought in, Lieutenant?" the corporal asked.

"One of the replacements who came in with the last load. Dorman, or something like that."

"Dorman. Luther Dorman."

"That's it. Did you know him, Tullis?"

"Luther Dorman. Luther made it and Dale and Hank Luftin got it. That's an odds-on bet if there ever was one. Goddamn it—"

"All right, Tullis," Major Thorpe said quietly. "We know how you feel. We all had good friends among them, too. Just take it easy."

"Sure, sure, take it easy. Take everything easy," Tullis said with anger. He looked up suddenly. "Can I use your jeep to go down to the CP, Major?"

"Sure, you go ahead," Thorpe replied. "One of us will take the coffee in to the old man when he begins hollering for it."

Tullis pulled his field jacket on and went out. Thorpe turned back to Bledso. "Well, Lieutenant, let's have the details for the general," he said.

"We don't actually have them all yet. Dorman is still unconscious. This patrol—"

"I know about it. I sat in on the general's briefing yesterday."

Bledso said, "For once, somebody sure hit the nail on the head. The patrol was out to find out if there was anything up there in the Grünwald. They found out that there was. After a few hours with no word, Wentworth sent a couple of scouts up the line to look for them, thinking they may have run into trouble, something too big for them to handle alone. Time they got there, a team from Charlie Company was already there. A machine-gun emplacement and a Tiger were set up and waiting for us a couple of miles inside the woods. Both are knocked out and if there was anything else farther ahead, it's sure as hell gone by now. With the sky clearing, we've called for air observation and support."

"What was the loss count?"

"Twelve of our men killed. Fourteen krauts in all, counting those in the tank. The only one who lived through it is our boy hero. Dorman."

"And merely being alive makes him a Medal of Honor man?" Thorpe asked.

"Well, look at it this way, Major. The patrol goes out to scout the forest ahead. They run into a camouflaged machine-gun emplacement and a tank trap. The setup has all the markings of more stuff farther up the line that, between them, could have wiped a lot of us and our equipment off the map today if they hadn't been found and knocked out. The patrol, in some way, got involved in a surprise situation, so they figure, 'Hell, let's take them on and—'"

Thorpe shook his head. "Hold it, Lieutenant. I'm afraid I must in all honesty call your attention to the fact that—"

Bledso grinned guiltily. "I know, your honor. It's strictly circum-

stantial evidence and, with only one survivor who can't talk yet, we don't know exactly what was said by anyone. Nor to whom. Well, sir, you've just got to understand that these are true Southern boys, at least most of them were, and we'll just have to *assume*—"

Thorpe held up a hand. "Permit me to apologize most profoundly, counselor. Go on, please, with your *assumed* facts."

"Thank you, your honor. Well, it would seem that the tank job was a one- or two-man job. The others seem to have been engaged in the problem of knocking out the machine gun. Once the tank was knocked out, it would seem that Dorman—"

"Oh. You're assuming Dorman, the new man, knocked out the tank?" Thorpe said with overtones of skepticism.

"Why not? It could as easily have been Dorman as anyone else."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant. Your deductions interest me."

"So it would seem that Dorman joined the others, some of whom were already killed. He and Hagen pulled some kind of diversionary tactic and rushed the nest, grenaded it to death. Hagen was killed in the maneuver and Dorman barely survived."

"And that's how it was."

A pause. "No doubt about it, Major."

"Just the way the general wants it."

Another pause. "Just about."

Thorpe looked at Bledsoe thoughtfully, then said slowly, "I guess so, Harry. I guess that's just about the way it happened at that."

"No doubt about it at all, Major. We can put Dorman in for the Medal of Honor, Hagen, Rupertus, and Crawford for Silver Stars, the rest for Bronze Stars."

They stood looking at each other for a moment and then heard the general's voice, living up to its nickname. "All right, all right out there, where's the coffee? Where's the damn coffee?"

Thorpe said to Bledsoe, "You'd better take it in to him, Harry, so you can break the good news to him and turn his whole day into brightness and cheer."

Chapter 10

1. July, 1945.

In song, poem, or prose, going home after a lengthy absence is almost invariably one of man's happiest states of mind and well-being, one of life's more memorable occasions. Going home was the theme of hundreds, thousands, millions of thoughts and dreams and conversations; in barracks, tents, planes, tanks, on ships; in strange, exotic, and faraway lands. It was undoubtedly Topic No. 1 in all the world, ranking ahead of sex and good food and whiskey and jobs and money and the future. In most cases, home was synonymous with all these.

Going home. What thoughts stirred through the minds of those who for these long, hard, exhausting years, ever since the day they left home, had been reaching toward that ultimate goal. Those who still remained in Europe cursed every minute and hour and day of delay. Those still fighting in the Pacific looked forward with keen anticipation to the day when the troops from the European theater would come upon the scene and join in one last, massive, desperate mop-up action that would take them victoriously down the main streets of Tokyo. In every mind lay the prayer, the hope that nothing would happen to him before he could get home. Home seemed so close to so many now.

Luther Dorman's feelings were sufficiently mixed to keep him awake and sleepless, this last night before they would reach Regis. He was used to sleeplessness, having come to believe he had reached a point where he needed only the few hours of sleep he had been getting instead of the eight to ten hours he was used to getting before the war. Bledso, snoring lightly in the upper berth, could hardly restrain his happiness by day, coming so much closer to home each minute of each hour that ticked away. He had begun to talk of it so much more since they had entrained for Regis; it had become a more imminent, realistic, and factual goal; his talk was smilingly and laughingly sprinkled with anecdotes that were

wrapped around his prewar life with his mother and father, a sister, a younger brother, cousins, aunts, uncles (some real and some who were close friends or neighbors and had achieved the honorary title of aunt or uncle, a not unusual phenomenon in the South). His powers of recall became greater now, remembering former chums, girls from his school and college days; suddenly concerned over those who had gone into the Army, Navy, Air Corps, and Marine Corps, hoping they would all return to pick up their lives where they had left off in 1942; all the while knowing that this would not, could not, be so; falling into the trap of wondering which would return, which would not. In lighter moments he was mildly concerned that many of the girls would surely be married and out of the arena of romantic circulation.

Bledso's buoyant and cheerful anecdotes, his almost incessant chatter and descriptions of life in his home circle began to depress Luther, bringing to mind his own early life in less agreeable or pleasant terms. His thoughts turned to Carrie and Bethann and Harriet, Claudia Holliman forgotten. He was terribly anxious to see them now; yet, the closer he came to Regis, the more fraudulent was his feeling toward Bethann. He knew there was none of the love or depth of feeling between them that he had willingly and willfully dreamed into that one night they had shared in the cabin in the woods. And with the closing of the miles between them, he began again to feel the hopelessness of a Dorman aspiring to marry a Radford.

That he was the father of Bethann's child, he was positive beyond the slightest doubt. They had been together that night, just as certain sure as any truly married couple, and Harriet was his daughter just as much as she was Bethann's, and nobody could change that. He knew it just as surely as she knew it, and it was something neither could avoid, must work out when he returned. As yet, he had been unable to define his feelings toward Harriet. He knew she was his and, Radford or no, he wanted what was rightfully his.

Above this, the biggest worry in his mind was: What would he do once he got back? What *could* he do, lacking education and training, with no special knowledge or experience or ability? Except perhaps to drive a moonshine truck, hauling corn whiskey up and down, back and forth across the state.

What? What lies ahead for a man who suddenly becomes important, yet has never learned to do anything useful or important or worthwhile? Where does he fit into the picture, he asked himself repeatedly.

He knew there would be a reception for him on arrival, that there would probably be a luncheon or a dinner with speeches and a cardboard or wooden key to the city presented to him. He had been through this dozens of times on the tour. Already, he could visualize the difference between his own townspeople and the masses he had seen in the defense-plant cities he had toured in the North and East and Midwest. Here at home would be the people who worked in town and on the farms surrounding the town, some from more distant towns, come to watch the "big doin's," white and colored alike. Like a big, a really *big* Saturday night in town with money to spend. But this one would be different because they were Regis people, neighbors, friends, warmer, friendlier. One thing he didn't have to worry about: he already knew his patented script of reply by heart, the one Captain Harris had written to cover this special occasion.

But soon the welcome reception would be over. *Then what?*

Afterwards, he thought sadly, he would be Luther Dorman again, son of Jud Dorman, brother of Carrie Dorman. Born a nobody, given a fleeting taste of fame, and then back to the nothingness from which he had come. Poor white trash. One notch above a Buckeytown nigger.

Unless— Unless he could work something out with Bethann and Mr. Marcus.

2.

Luther came awake with a jolting start as the train whistle hooted its approach to a crossing. The radium-dialed watch on his wrist spelled out the hour, 4:10. They were due in Regis at 11:40. There was lots of time. Lots of time to think.

So much to remember. So much he would like to forget. His thoughts took an already established pattern, beginning with That Night and Dale's haunting face of death staring with opened eyes into his own. He pushed hard, crowding the vision out with one of Bethann and Harriet. And now another face began to insert itself into the screen in his mind: that of a stern, hard, angry Marcus Radford, the man he must face up to, to whom he would have to confess that he was the father of his unmarried daughter's child. Surely Bethann had already told Marcus. She couldn't have avoided it. Still, he wondered.

Would Marcus fight him, run him off? Could Marcus do a thing like that, he being the child's father? And if he tried it, he was still Harriet's father, by God, and no damned law in the world

could change that! No, sir! By sure God, it couldn't! Perhaps he could talk it over with Marcus, if Marcus would only show some inclination to talk. If so, he was sure Marcus would take him in hand and help him to become something—maybe get him an important political job. Politics.

Bledso had said only last night, "Right now, with your name and publicity value and your uniform with the Medal of Honor on it and a proper display of modesty, you could get yourself elected to any office in the state, short of United States Senator, Congressman, or governor, or one that required special knowledge or training. How about sheriff of Regis County? With a good public relations man behind you like Joel Harris, you could have it handed to you all wrapped up in waxed paper and with a red ribbon around it. Hell, I'd guess that a word from your Marcus Radford in the right place would sew it up for you. Surely the people would turn out for you."

Why not, he thought now. Just why the hell not?

And the answer came back to him as simply as if it had been scrawled across a huge blackboard in big, white letters.

Marcus Audrey Radford.

He would have to make his peace with Marcus Radford in some way. Only those men of Mr. Marcus's choice ever won an election in Regis County, and a lot of bad could happen to any man who opposed him.

"Well," Bledso had said, "you never know. This Radford character might even believe a hero deserves a break. You never know if you don't ask. I've heard a lot about him and I'm sure he knows my father. Maybe I could help. Suppose I stick around for a day or two and see if I can get a chance to hint it to him?"

Luther switched on the light in the lower berth, found his cigarettes in the net hammock dangling beside him. He lit one and, when he finished it, knew he would have to get out of the berth because there was no ashtray. He sat up, threw off the covers, and got out so he could stand up and stretch. Cold air was seeping into the drafty compartment, and he rubbed his hands over his body and along his goose-pimpled arms to stimulate circulation. He stripped off the fancy pajamas he had bought at Woodward and Lothrop's in Washington, kicked off the leather slippers from Marshall Field's in Chicago, began pulling on undershirt and shorts from Filene's in Boston. He put on fresh uniform trousers and shirt, knowing he would not be able to sleep again before daylight.

Bledso raised up on an elbow and looked down on him from the

upper berth. "Now what in hell's got into you, buddy boy? You going to be doing this for the rest of your life, getting up in the dark when you don't have to? What's eating you, chum? I'd think any man after what you've been through would be able to sleep for twenty-four hours at a clip even with an .88 ripping his bed apart."

Luther smiled up at the lieutenant, feeling an amazingly warm kinship for this personable companion whom he had come to regard as a close friend, always on hand, taking confidence from him during those moments of dark doubt when he had had to speak Harris's words in the horrible silence to the thousands of faceless people before him. Now he wished that Bledso was a Regis man and not from Chancellor, and would remain with him.

"You know, Lieutenant," Luther said, "I'm sure going to miss you when you pull out and leave me behind in Regis. I've just been thinking. Why'n't you stay for a while? You might even find out we got some nice-looking girls around for you to fall for." The next two words popped out suddenly, unexpectedly. "Like mine."

Bledso's head jerked upward. "Yours?" he exclaimed. "Now how in hell come you've never mentioned you had a girl all this time? I got to thinking you were rocked over that cute little Boston trick and were close-mouthed because you were separated from her. For all Harris and I knew, you were just another kid that played the farm circuit for your excitement. And now, a girl! Well. How do you think she's going to look to you after all this stuff you've been gandering at in the biggest cities in the country?"

"Her? You don't have to worry none about her. No, sir. Not this one. She'll stand up against the best of 'em. She's something. Yes, sir, a real something."

"As our erstwhile friend Corporal Tullis used to say, 'Well, I'll be go-to-hell!' And with that, I wish you luck, and will you please hand my shoes up to me so I can hop down and get dressed? You being such a damned hero and taking the lower berth for yourself, you can very well—"

"Now, Lieutenant, you know good and well I wanted to take that upper berth and you said yourself, you said, 'Nothing doing. You're the hero and your Medal of Honor outranks my silver bar by about a thousand in-between grades, so you go on and take the lower.' You said you didn't want me to go around telling folks in Regis how biggety I was even for one night, being over a first lieutenant."

They chattered along good-naturedly, completed their shaving, Bledso cutting himself and cursing the swaying train. Finished, they

packed their night things and shaving gear into their suitcases and went into the empty club car, stretching out before a wide window. A porter came into the car carrying several pairs of shined shoes along his left arm. To a question from Bledso, he slurred sleepily, "No, suh. Dinin' cyar, hit won' be open till six-thutty, jus' aftuh we leave Peace Cross."

The first finger of a weak sun was beginning to throw its flat light on the countryside, and Luther could make out the ridges of furrowed land, cotton plants almost a foot high that, come September, would burst out into white clouds, almost ready for the picking. It was the first cotton field they had seen thus far and nothing could have spoken to Luther more eloquently. A thin, low mist hung suspended over the earth, and he knew that as the sun would rise higher, it would burn through and the mist would disappear. Then the sun's warmth would penetrate the red soil, and the rich earth would strike the nostrils of man and beast alike, telling each, "This is a new day, a glorious new day. Be glad. Be grateful. Be happy."

Bledso turned, tapping Luther's left shoulder. "Come on, chum. That was Peace Cross we just passed and it's six-thirty-five. 'Dinin' cyar hit open at six-thutty, suh,'" he mimicked the porter. "Let's take on some of that good old prewar American coffee we've gotten used to—the kind you don't have to make with powder and stale, decontaminated water in a canteen cup that's either too hot to hold or too cold to have any taste."

After breakfast Bledso went back to their compartment to take a nap while Luther remained in the dining car over an unhurried third pot of coffee.

Thoughts of home came crowding into his mind again, unpleasant memories of his life with Jud, a man with no schooling who could see no need for his children to learn beyond the stages of reading and writing. As he had done so many times since he began traveling with Bledso, he began to compare the stories of Bledso's home life as a child with memories of his own childhood. For each joyful anecdote Bledso recounted, Luther could easily match it with an unpleasant occurrence in his own life. Thinking of himself in these terms again, he began to speculate on how it would be when they would reach Regis—whether people would even bother to turn out for him as total strangers had in distant cities; whether they would even take the trouble to come down to the station out

of idle curiosity, perhaps to stare disinterestedly and say, "Oh, that's just Luther Dorman, drunken old Jud Dorman's boy a-comin' home."

And that might be the sum total of it, he told himself. Back to the faded overalls and the twenty-two acres of worthless soil he had escaped, or to make contact with Tam Nariocas or Johnny Norris to see if he could get back on one of their delivery trucks.

He tried to visualize what those twenty-two acres would look like, uncared for these four years, overgrown with Jimson weed and Johnson grass, the murky, muddy drainage ditch that would have to be cleared out, the yellow-brown dirt of the backyard area that would blow up and sift itself over everything. So much would need to be done. And in this simmering heat.

His jaws tightened and the hard muscles on both sides of his face stood out in knots as he began to grind the fist of his right hand into the open palm of his left. *Christ! Christ Almighty!* he said under his breath. *I need a break right here and now. I know I don't deserve one, but You know I didn't ask them to make no hero out of me. I didn't want to kill Dale. You and I know that, God. Trouble is, You and me, we're the onliest ones who know it. Please. Please be with me this one time, Jesus. I tried to kill myself and You wouldn't let me do that, so I know You know I didn't mean to kill him. I don't ever remember asking You for nothing like this in my whole lifetime. Not anything as big as this. All I'm asking of You now is to help me over whatever I'm going to run into here. I need some help and You're the only one can give it to me. Amen, Lord.*

The dining car steward approached him and asked, "Is there anything else we can get for you, Sergeant? Some fresh coffee?" Luther looked up and saw several people waiting to be seated.

"No. No, thanks," he replied with some embarrassment. "Could I—uh—have the check, please?"

"The lieutenant paid for it already, Sergeant. I hope you enjoyed your breakfast."

4.

Luther Dorman stepped out into the vestibule of the car as the train rolled to a slow, hissing, bell-clanging stop in the Regis station. Harry Bledso stood behind and to one side of him while they looked out over the heads that bobbed up and down and ran beside the car trying to catch the first glimpse of his charge. Most of them were youngsters, boys and girls who could not be restrained to wait with the more orderly adults. The train came to a lurching halt at the

exact spot that had been designated, where a red carpet had been laid down along the cement platform. Directly ahead, Luther could see the front line of official greeters, Mayor Sime Hedrick standing in front of a group of county supervisors, the entire city council behind them. To the left stood a ramrod-stiffened color guard, behind them representatives of the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, wearing their peaked caps with insignia, some in distinctive uniforms of their organizations, others in civilian suits with World War I medals dangling from their left breast pockets. To the right was the Regis High School marching band, stepped off in four rows.

A small blonde girl, wearing a flouncy pink dress, stood to one side of Mayor Hedrick, holding one end of a wide, dark blue ribbon, the other end clutched by a small boy of like age. In bold white letters, the message on the ribbon read:

REGIS GIVES ITS KEY
TO ITS OWN HERO,
LUTHER DORMAN!

Mayor Hedrick stepped forward and handed a large, gilded wooden key to Luther, saying his words of welcome that could not be heard above the noises of departing trains. When his mouth stopped moving, the leader of the band raised and lowered his baton and the musicians were blaring out a martial air of welcome. Behind the color guard, Luther finally picked out Carrie's beaming face. She was standing beside Marcus Radford and behind them stood another group of people that included several Assemblymen and State Senators. Behind them, a group of reporters stood on a slightly raised platform with the press photographers and radio commentators.

Luther stepped down upon the red carpet and threw a look behind him as if to say to Bledso, "Don't desert me now." He accepted the key from the mayor, threw a sharp salute, then extended his right hand to shake the one thrust toward him by Hedrick. As the band played, he passed in front of the city councilmen and county supervisors and shook hands with each as the mayor called off their names in introduction. Now he was near the second group, closer to the one face that was most important to him. Carrie. She was dressed modestly and smartly in a navy blue linen suit, its sleeves ending above her elbows, topped with a close-fitting matching jacket that hardly reached her waist. She raised one short-gloved hand in a small wave that he returned with a wide smile. Her other hand

held a bouquet of flowers. Now his eyes met Marcus Radford's and noted Mr. Marcus's immaculate white linen suit. He glanced about quickly to see if Bethann was with them, perhaps to give Harriet her first view of her father in triumphant return; but there was no Bethann, no Harriet. As he stepped away from Mr. Marcus's smile and handshake and stood before Carrie, the flash bulbs from the raised platform began exploding at a more furious pace. He embraced Carrie and kissed her, crushing the bouquet she was holding.

The band finished the march, and someone held the leader in check so that the balance of the speeches could be said and heard over the loudspeakers and picked up by the radio microphones. All about them was the incessant chattering, voices calling his name, arms and flags waving, homemade "Welcome Home" signs being held aloft. All in all, with the exception of the few faces that were easily recognizable, it was beginning to take on the same noisy flavor as Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and the other cities on the tour.

He looked upward over the raised platform and saw the large painted banner with a blowup of his own picture, ribboned medal hung from his neck, the sign reading:

WELCOME HOME, LUTHER DORMAN—
ALL REGIS IS PROUD OF ITS
GREAT HERO!

A bugle sounded an unfamiliar call, and when it ended, there was a stern, "Pre—ce—sent!—Harms!" and the four members of the color guard saluted with flags and rifles, holding their stiffened positions while a second lieutenant marched front and center and saluted the master sergeant who wore the Medal of Honor. Luther heard Bledso's calm voice in his ear, saying, "Return his salute," and he did so. The lieutenant dropped his hand, stepped back smartly one pace, did an about face, and ordered the color guard to stand at ease.

Six deputy sheriffs cleared a path for them as colored porters opened doors leading into the station, and they passed by a row of welcoming posters on their way to the front of the building where the cars were parked. The lead car was Mr. Marcus's long, black limousine, where Newton stood grinning, holding the door open. Marcus showed Luther and Carrie and Bledso in, then got in after them, ordered Newton to move on behind the growling sirens of the motorcycles, led by Sheriff Willis Bartly's official car. Behind the limousine came the cars bearing Mayor Hedrick, Judge Whipple,

District Attorney James Freeman, with Chief Deputy Hessie Loomis leading this second group in his official county car, wearing the same dark, forbidding, and unsmiling face, the inevitable toothpick pointing upward and outward from the corner of his mouth. Next in line were other city, county, and state officials, followed by the balance of the motorcycle squad from the sheriff's office.

They wheeled up Laurel Drive, the main street, and in the middle of each block banners stretched across the street displaying the individual welcomes of the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club, the Women's Club, Garden Club, Optimists' Club, and other local organizations. Store windows were adorned with their own "Welcome Home" signs, and people lined the streets while the shouting youngsters ran alongside the slowly moving limousine.

The motorcade came into the Square, circling it completely before stopping in front of the Regis Hotel where another red carpet had been rolled out, reaching from the edge of the pavement up the steps and into the hotel lobby. Bledso threw a quick glance toward the glassy-eyed Luther and winked with a broad grin, but Luther's frozen face could not return the wink or grin. They walked along the carpet and up the steps, and before he could enter the lobby, a very pretty girl, dressed in a tight-waisted, wide-hooped skirt purporting to represent the dress of Colonial days, approached the party and handed Luther a bouquet of roses, then stood on her toes and kissed him. He heard her say, "On behalf of the City of Regis, welcome home, Sergeant Dorman."

Bledso leaned forward and whispered into his ear, "If you don't kiss her quick, boy, I'll sure as hell do it for you."

Luther leaned forward and kissed the girl's mouth as the on-lookers applauded and cheered. He turned back to wave to the crowd, and on the inner rim of the crowd he caught a glimpse of Fred Archer's smiling face, hand raised in a wave; and Luther recalled in a flash that this man had once been Carrie's suitor. There were other familiar faces, but in the surging crush it was so difficult to tie them to names.

The next hour passed slowly, dreamlike. He and Bledso were permitted to go to a first-floor room where they found their luggage that had been brought from the station. They changed quickly into fresh shirts and were then escorted out of the hotel to the center of the Square where an awning had been erected around the base of the monument to Regis's Confederate Soldier.

Once again they stood together, Luther slightly to the front, Carrie holding the bouquet of roses presented earlier to Luther, with

Marcus Radford and Harry Bledso in the background; and now there was an official representative of the governor to greet him officially. On the pavements and grass the crowds pushed and jostled for better positions while the still and motion-picture cameras again went into action. Off the Square, on the pavements in the distance, stood the Negroes, taking in the pageantry with the calm curiosity that usually attended them as they looked on at the "white folks' doin's." Among the crowds moved the venders selling flags, "Welcome Home, Luther" badges and balloons, soft drinks, and confections.

Out of the panorama of faces that formed in a huge circle around him came the voices calling loudly, "Hi, Luther!" and "Yeah, boy!" and "Hidy, Luther!" Faces jutted in and out asking to be remembered. Now the people began to pass in single file to shake his hand, each with a word of welcome, the youngsters pressing autograph books toward him for his signature, but such was the push in the line he could not accommodate them. "I'll do it for you later," he promised.

It surprised him that he knew so few of these home-town folks. The faces of the few men he did recognize, although he could not remember their names, were older, darker, and more leathery from the suns of many summers. Most of the boys his own age were still away in service and had not yet returned. There were some in uniform, but most of them were not in the line. They stood outside the group, curious, perhaps resentful of the man who was taking from them some of the glory of their own return.

Finally it was over, and they crossed the Square once more to go to the Regis Hotel where they sat down to a luncheon for as many officials as could crowd into the dining room. The food was served and eaten, more speeches were made, and the presidents of the various civic groups each came forward to present Luther with certificates that would later materialize into such necessities as clothing for himself, his father, and sister, for furnishings, groceries, and other items, all donated by the merchants of the community. There were lifetime passes to the two motion-picture houses, honorary memberships in the Chamber of Commerce and its related Junior Chamber, Rotary, Kiwanis, American Legion, and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

The latter two organizations made an extraordinary presentation with the cooperation of the Army. It was Luther's carbine that had been polished and lacquered and now rested in a glass-and-mahogany case, together with two (harmless) hand grenades, pur-

ported to have been brought back with him from the forest in Germany. These had been sent back by General Bentley and would later be sent to the state capitol building in Chancellor and placed upon a marble stand with a commemorative silver plaque, to be preserved among the state's souvenirs of this and previous wars.

"And so now, Luther," Marcus Radford said finally into the microphones, "you have been duly honored by your state, made an official part of its history, and have become a legend in your own time."

The crowd began to file out of the room. Luther remained seated next to Carrie. Mr. Marcus said, "You're going to stay here at the hotel, Luther, you and this fine, young friend of yours. Now don't worry about the cost of anything while you're here at the hotel. You're the special guest of the city and county, and that's the way the folks here want it to be. When all the celebrating is over and things quiet down, we'll have a nice long talk and you can decide a few things for yourself. But whatever you decide, we want you to know we're going to insist that it be right here in your own home town, with your own home folks and kin. Now, you and the lieutenant go on up to your suite and relax until the banquet tonight. And don't worry about your father or Carrie. I'll see she gets home and that she'll be back here in time for the festivities tonight."

He started out, turned back to Carrie, and said smilingly, "I guess you'd like a few minutes alone with Luther, Carrie. The lieutenant and I will wait in the lobby."

Now they were alone for the first time and he turned to Carrie and asked, "How's Pa?"

She had her arm entwined in his and leaned closer to him. "We took care of him. He's all right."

Luther interpreted this to mean that Marcus Radford had undoubtedly provided Jud with enough whiskey to keep him happily drunk and asleep while Carrie was in town. He pressed his lips together in a small grimace and shook his head. "How's Miss Bethann?" he asked.

"Miss Bethann's fine. Prettier than ever. She had to stay home with the baby."

"How is the baby?"

Carrie smiled. "She's a sweet, darling little thing. Such a bright child for three and a half."

She waited for his next question, and he knew she would not volunteer any further news about Bethann or Harriet unless he asked a direct question.

"Luther, you're all right now, aren't you?"

"Sure. Sure, Carrie, I'm fine. Everything is all healed up and I don't even get as tired as I used to. They couldn't have treated me any better than they did."

"You take your time before you decide—"

The next words popped out of his mouth as though he could not control them. "Ruth-Rachel Hagen," he said.

She said, startled, "What about Ruth-Rachel?"

"How is she? How did she take the—the—news—about—?"

"She took the whole thing hard. First, when she lost the baby and then—"

"Lost the baby? When? Only a few months ago, just before this—thing—happened, Dale was talking his head off about Ruth-Rachel and the baby."

"I know about that. The truth of the whole thing is that Dale didn't even know the baby'd died about six or seven months after it was born. Lutie wouldn't let Ruth-Rachel tell Dale about it, said he had enough on his mind trying to stay alive over there. She was going to wait until he came back to break the bad news to him."

"God Almighty!" Luther exclaimed. "And all that time, he thought—"

"You'll have to find the time to go over and see her and Lutie, Luther. It would be God's own blessing if you did that much for them. Lutie's half out of her mind most of the time as it is. Been that way since they got the telegram the same day we got the one about your being wounded. Later on the government sent Ruth-Rachel a medal for Dale's being in that same patrol with you that night."

How it had been changed about, he thought. Now they've got Dale being with me on the patrol instead of me being with him. A sudden pain hit him in the pit of his stomach, and for a moment he thought he was going to be sick. Oh, Christ! he whimpered to himself, how long have I got to live with this thing? How long?

He heard Carrie's voice coming back to him. "—and Lutie's been like a sick or crazy woman. She always was a little—well, kind of touched, but now she goes around saying and doing the queerest things that don't make any sense at all."

"Like what?"

"Well, like when the insurance money came right after Dale was killed. It was made out in Lutie's name, just like his allotment was, so Ruth-Rachel couldn't get a cent of the money. She said it was God's hand did it that way to prove Dale loved her more than he did Ruth-Rachel."

"Ruth-Rachel's been living with Lutie all this time?"

Carrie nodded. "When Dale left, he begged Ruth-Rachel to stay with Lutie for just a while, until he could start sending her some money out of his Army pay and allotment. But the checks were made out to Lutie instead of Ruth-Rachel. By the time they started coming in, Lutie'd made up her mind Ruth-Rachel was going to keep on living with her so she could keep an eye on her. Then there was her being pregnant and not having enough money for her to live on alone, and she couldn't work in that condition, so she stayed on, much as she hated it. After the baby came, Lutie wouldn't hear of her moving out. And after the baby died, she wouldn't even let Ruth-Rachel go out of the house without following her around like a watchdog.

"After the insurance money came and Lutie got it all, she got even stricter with Ruth-Rachel and insisted that she wear black mourning clothes, won't let her use lipstick or smoke. When she leaves the house, day or night, Lutie is right there behind her. Once Ruth-Rachel sneaked into a movie and Lutie marched right in behind her and started a real commotion in the place, praying and preaching and calling down the wrath of the Lord on her until the manager came and put them both out."

Luther got up and said, "Let's get out of here."

Carrie stood up and kissed him, put her arms around him tightly and held him close to her. "I'll see you tonight, Luther," she said. "You try to get a nap so you won't be tired out."

"I will, Carrie. You look out for things at home," he replied meaningfully.

She understood and nodded. "Don't worry, Luther. Everything will be just fine."

They went out into the lobby where Bledso joined them. Carrie said, "Luther's been telling me how kind and helpful you've been to him, Lieutenant, and I'd like to say 'thanks' for helping him."

Bledso said in his most charming manner, "Miss Carrie, it was a pleasure being with him from the start. Finishing up by meeting you makes it all the more pleasurable."

Carrie crimsoned. "You watch out for him, Carrie," Luther said. "He can turn more heads in a minute than a drill sergeant calling 'Eyes right!'"

They laughed and Marcus joined them to drive Carrie home. Ed Pringle followed Marcus and Carrie to the door, then came back and showed Luther and Bledso into the hallway to the elevator, had it take them to the fourth floor. A suite had been prepared for them,

a bedroom with twin beds and a sitting room. "Enjoy yourselves, gentlemen," Ed said with a smile as he ushered them in. "Everything is on the house, courtesy of the city and county of Regis. Just ask for anything you want and sign for it. Don't pay for anything."

"How about a drink?" Bledso asked.

"Regis's finest coming right up, sir," said Pringle with a smile.

When he had gone out, Bledso snapped his fingers impatiently. "Damn!" he exclaimed.

"What's wrong?" Luther asked. "You forget something, Lieutenant?"

"I sure as hell did. If it's as easy as all that, why didn't I ask him for that gal who handed you those flowers? That's something I could really sign for."

5.

The banquet that night was but a larger, more elaborate and crowded version of the luncheon. Tables had been set up in the shape of a huge U, other tables placed between the uprights of the U, with a special table upon a dais so that all present could see Luther and the dignitaries who had been chosen to sit with him. He sat between Marcus Radford and Carrie, who were flanked on either side by Congressman Dale Butcher and Attorney General Phillip Lloyd, State Senators, judges, Assemblymen, and other prominent citizens. Facing them were the merchants who had contributed the cost of the banquet and funds for maintaining Luther at the hotel until he would decide where and how he would be settled. It was without question Regis's biggest night in many a year, almost as big a celebration as VE Day had been. People milled about the Square in a holiday mood and the band played through the evening while youngsters danced along the cemented walks to the music as others paraded through the hotel lobby and past the main dining room hoping to catch a glimpse of the official festivities.

Marcus was finishing the principal address of the evening. "—for this young man who was born and raised among us and who has shown the nation, the entire world, the kind of decisive action of which heroes are made, a young man whose gallantry, bulldog courage and fortitude, his contempt for danger, has set an example for all men to follow. There have been many fancy words used by others to describe the immensity of his daring deeds. Let me boil it down to one simple but understandable word. What it all adds up to is guts!"

The applause was deafening. Knives and spoons rattled against

glasses, fists pounded tables, and shouts of approval filled the air. When the noise abated, Marcus continued. "The measure of freedom is that which has been given up to gain it, the number of young, brave lives, the hardships endured by all; and we know from all accounts of the unselfish courage shown by the men of Regis County who were with Luther Dorman on that fateful night—Dale Hagen, Henry Luftin, and others who were on patrol with him. But the good Lord saw fit to take those others unto Him and send us back one so that the world would know that our men have contributed as much as any others to the winning of this war; that other of our men at this moment continue to fight on in the Pacific to win that phase of the war.

"So it has been since the days of the American Revolution. So it has been since the War Between the States when our men went forward from this state to bring honor and glory to its name. So it was in the war with Spain and in World War I. And now we are privileged to pay homage to our own Regis County heroes, those who died in a German forest on the night of March 17 of this year, and one who, by God's Grace and Will, was permitted to return to us. A true hero, awarded the nation's highest medal for personal sacrifice and bravery far beyond the call of duty, and so honored by our great President of the United States."

Timed to the moment, he concluded his remarks, and amid the tumultuous applause, four boys burst into the room and began to distribute copies of the *Herald* to all present. On the front page was an eight-column heading that splashed its way across from border to border in the largest type seen since the war had begun:

WELCOME HOME, LUTHER!

Beneath it was a four-column photograph of Luther that had been taken at the station that morning, grinning shyly as he shook hands with Mayor Hedrick. Beneath the photograph was a four-column boxed-in-red editorial, set two columns wide and spaced so that it would have room to breathe and be more readable to all. It was signed by Gordon Thomas as editor and publisher of the *Herald*, and the words were simple, but strong. Marcus rapped for order and called upon Gordon Thomas to read his own editorial. Thomas rose and the room fell quiet as he began reading:

"He came home to Regis today.

"He left here on December 8, 1941, the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, unwilling, like others who went with him on that memorable day, to wait for his call to service by means of the draft.

He simply put down the tools of his trade, a farm boy, and came into town and enlisted. During those bitter years that followed, he became a seasoned soldier, a fighter for, and defender of, everything we Americans hold dear and sacred: the freedoms that dictators had already taken from many, and were ready to take from the rest of what was left of the free world.

"He became a member of one of the most exclusive groups of men in the world, men whose selfless devotion and dedication to our great American Cause and Way of Life went far and beyond the normal bounds and reaches of duty. He became a great hero.

"A Medal of Honor hero.

"We honor him today, our friend, neighbor, son, and brother, with actions rather than words. Greater writers and finer orators in this wonderful land of ours have already written of his deeds and spoken their praises far more eloquently than this poor effort of mine to express that which we all feel so deeply and sincerely in our hearts.

"Others have frequently asked: *What is the quality of a man's courage?* And again, *What is the measure of a hero?*

"With the authority that can come only with certain knowledge, we of Regis can answer those two questions perhaps better than most, for the answer is one and the same. It is simply:

"I Luther Dorman of Regis!"

Luther got up slowly and spoke the words he had rehearsed so many times before, the words Captain Joel Harris had written and made him say over and over again until he had memorized them, could speak them without referring to the notes that were put down on cards and tucked into his shirt pocket "just in case." Now he spoke the words with far deeper feeling as he looked out over the sea of faces—the faces of his own friends, dearly beloved friends and neighbors. He thanked them, one and all, for their wonderful and inspiring welcome, and then turned the spotlight away from himself.

"I don't think of myself as a hero, no more than the millions of men who left their homes and families to fight the enemy on allied and alien soil, in ships, in the air, on the ground, and under the seas. If I have been chosen for a special honor, I know deep inside of me that every single man and woman in uniform shares a tiny fragment of the medal awarded me. There are those far more deserving of this great honor, men who lie dead in Africa, in Italy, on the beaches of Normandy, in France, throughout the Pacific, and especially in a

dark forest in Germany. They are the heroes, the men to whom we must all be grateful. . . .”

Later, the tables were cleared and others admitted to the room for the dancing. Most of what followed was a blur of faces and words, hand-shaking, back-slapping, and voices calling his name to attract his attention. He saw Bledso dancing with Carrie, her face flushed with the excitement of the evening and the handsome lieutenant who was her partner; saw her with Fred Archer, first dancing, then in conversation. Finally, he had a moment alone with her.

“You will try to see Ruth-Rachel and Lutie, won’t you, Luther?” she asked.

“Sure. Sure, Carrie. I know how much it will mean to them, hearing from the one who was last to see Dale alive. I’ll do it real soon. I promise.”

Bledso, finding Carrie alone with Luther, claimed her once again. “Come, come, Miss Carrie,” he chided. “Once this furor is over, you’ll have Luther all to yourself for months and years to come. Your opportunity with me is but a fleeting moment that you should take full advantage of.”

Carrie laughed happily as she moved away with him. “How fleeting, Lieutenant?” she asked.

Bledso shrugged. “Almost any time now. Luther is in good and capable hands. I could leave tomorrow for Chancellor.”

“So soon?” Carrie’s voice showed her disappointment.

“Unless Luther wants me to stay for another day or two. I’ve got a family of my own waiting. They wanted to come down to Regis to see me here, but I had to warn them they would be able to do so only from a distance. Besides, I don’t think I would show up as well to them here in the shadow of Luther Dorman as I would stepping off the train in Chancellor, the sole object of their admiration and love.”

“I was hoping you could stay longer, but I know your folks will be anxious.”

“Perhaps I’ll be able to get down for a visit sometime after I’ve taken my bar examinations. And pass them.”

For a moment there was silence between them. “What do you think will happen to Luther?” Carrie asked with some concern.

Bledso shrugged again. “I wish I could tell you, Carrie. A lot will depend on tomorrow when he goes to meet Mr. Radford. If he will let me, I’ll go along with him. If he won’t, I’ll catch the morning train home. I hope he’ll want me to go with him. I might be able to help him. At least, I’d like to try.”

6.

It was nearing two in the morning when Luther and Bledso finally got to their suite, undressed, and lay on their beds trying to relax their tired bodies.

"Whew!" Bledso exclaimed. "I sure hope I don't ever have to go through another one of these. People down here, say what you want, Luther, they've got strength and fortitude! All the things Mr. Radford said in his speech about the things you had, they've got it double!"

Luther lay on his bed, eyes closed, his mouth curled in a smile. Bledso stretched and yawned sleepily. "This has been a night you'll probably remember for the rest of your life. I wonder what you're thinking of right now."

"I don't know exactly," Luther replied, "but somehow this whole thing here is different. All those cities we went to, one right after the other, the noise, the hollering and all, I was scared of it. Here in Regis, all of a sudden it's different. I like it. These people are—well, they're my own people, and I guess that's what makes the big difference. Up north I felt like I was a curiosity, like the tattooed man or bearded lady in the circus sideshow, but here they're just plain nice to me. I'm going to hate for it to come to an end."

"You know, of course, Luther, that like any other story it must come to an end, don't you? That it can't keep going on and on and on."

"Sure, I know that. I guess I know it better than anybody else because I'm the one that's got to figure out what's going to be when it does come to an end."

"What *do* you want to do, Luther? Have you any idea at all?"

The smile left Luther's face and he turned to Bledso and said with all seriousness, "I only wish to God I knew. And if I thought you could help me figure it out, I'd go down on my knees and ask you for that help. By now you probably know as much about me as most people here do, what my father is, an old man too drunk to be brought out for his own son's homecoming. So, what happens after tomorrow, after it's all over? Today is no problem and tomorrow won't be any problem. It's the day after that. That's what I don't know about."

"Tomorrow you've got an appointment to see Mr. Radford."

"I know."

"Do you think he might have some sort of county job in mind for you?"

"Doing what? I got no training for anything. I can't do office work or—"

"There are other jobs that don't require formal education or training, Luther—"

Luther laughed without mirth. "I was ready to tie into a job like that when the war came along. I can go back to that, I guess. Driving a truck for the moonshine syndicate. If I don't go back to that, it's working twenty-two acres of worn-out dirt that don't even belong to us. Next to that, all I can do is hire out as a laborer."

Bledso tamped the cigarette out in the ashtray and said, "No. Hell, no, Luther. I don't think you'll have to settle for anything like that. I'm sure I can work out a better deal for you with Mr. Radford, if you'd like me to go across to the bank with you in the morning when you have your meeting. That's the very least I can do for you before I leave for Chancellor."

"You're sure welcome to come along, Lieutenant. I'd appreciate it a whole lot because once I'm in that office of his, anything Mr. Radford says goes."

"Then let's get to sleep and we'll keep the appointment together. I'd like to leave here as soon as something is settled between you. If we can have it fixed by noon, I could be in Chancellor by late tomorrow night."

7.

In the early morning Luther came wide awake, a habit his new status had not relieved. Harry Bledso was fast asleep in the other bed, a faint, light snore emanating from his half-open mouth, the light summer blanket kicked off him and lying on the floor at the foot of the bed, sheet pulled up to his naked waist. His long legs were fully outstretched, feet sticking out from under the sheet at the end of the bed. The pajama jacket Harry had worn to bed last night had been stripped off during the night and tossed in the general direction of the chair near the window, lying partly on the seat, the rest of it on the floor. Some sense of Army orderliness compelled Luther to get out of bed, pick up the jacket, and fold it neatly over the arm of the chair.

He took one of Bledso's cigarettes from its pack, lit it, and went into the other room of their suite. The air coming in through the open windows was still cool, would turn hot and humid when the sun rose higher into the sky and began to bear its weight down on the city. He went to the window and looked down from the four-storied height. The clock in the Square said that it was 8:10 and al-

ready the workers were on their way to their offices and stores as city employees began to sweep the crosswalks. Already, the old men who had nothing else to do were staking out claims on preferred benches, arriving early to choose a spot that would be tree-shaded during the afternoon when the sun would be hottest.

"Hey!" It was Harry Bledso calling from the inner room. Luther turned away from the window and went to the doorway. "Mornin', Lieutenant," he greeted. "You sleep all right?"

"All right, but not enough. Whew! After all that swamp juice and dancing, I could sleep the clock around, but as long as I woke up on my own, I don't guess I need it. How about calling down for a gallon of coffee?"

Luther hesitated. "How about you calling while I take a fast shower and shave?"

Bledso smiled. "Luther, you'd better get used to doing these little things yourself. Just like you'd been doing it for years. You've heard me and Joel Harris doing it in Washington and Chicago and everywhere else. You can order things for yourself without feeling self-conscious. Go ahead and try it now."

Luther grinned nervously, uncertainly. He picked up the receiver and, when the operator answered, said, "Uh—this—uh—400. Would you send—have some coffee sent up, please?"

"Yes, Sergeant Dorman," the girl said. "It'll be up right away."

He hung up with a sense of satisfaction. Bledso said, "You see how it is, Luther? Even though it's your home town and people remember you as a little farm boy who grew up here, you're a grown man now with a hell of a lot of status packed into that little blue ribbon with the white stars on it. Just forget about the old and remember the new. You're somebody different now. These people want to remember it, so you've got to let them enjoy themselves. Just keep thinking that you're every bit the big man they think you are. The President himself said so, the newspapers and magazines all said so, but if you don't act the part, nobody will believe them, and you certainly don't want to make liars out of the White House and the press, do you? Hell, to these people here, you're the biggest thing that's happened since the Flood. Don't spoil their fun. They're entitled to it."

"Sure. Sure, Lieutenant," Luther said.

"And another thing. We've been long overdue to cut out this Lieutenant and Sergeant crap. I'm fed to the teeth with it. Go take

your shower now and when you're through, you can begin the day by calling me 'Harry.'"

Over a final pot of fresh coffee and cigarettes, Bledso asked, "What time did Radford say he wanted to see you?"

"No special time. After breakfast, I guess. He's always at the bank by nine-thirty or ten. It's almost that now."

"Then let's straighten up our medals and go over and see him."

"Okay." There was a pause. "You sure you want to go along, Lieut—uh—Harry?"

Bledso smiled. "I was never surer. Why not? Let's hear what the big man has to say. You may not need me at all, but if I can be of some little help by being there— A strange face, Luther; you can't tell, it might just—"

Marcus Radford put the letter down and began to dictate his reply to Miss Marshall. He rose as Luther and Bledso were shown into his private office, saying, "Come in, boys, come right on in and pull up these two chairs." To Miss Marshall he said politely, "That will be all for the moment, Betty. We'll finish this up later."

In crisp white with flowing black tie, Marcus Radford was the picture of the successful planter-banker. Tall, well-tanned, with gray at the temples, his was the pigmented skin that did not fear exposure to the sun. He pulled three cigars from his jacket pocket and offered them, Luther refusing in favor of a cigarette, Harry Bledso accepting his and the proffered light in Radford's hand.

"Well, boys," he greeted smilingly, "I hope you're feeling fit after last night's festivities. I left around eleven, eleven-thirty myself." He laughed. "Getting up there where ten hours of sleep can't do for me what five or six used to do."

"We're just fine, Mr. Marcus," Luther said appreciatively. "Folks sure are treating us nice. Real nice, sir."

"And that's just as it should be, by God," Marcus stated with emphasis. "It's not every day we get a chance to show our debt to our heroes coming out of that harrowing conflict alive and—"

Bledso held up a hand and smiled deprecatingly. "Now don't you be robbing Luther of any part of his glory, Mr. Radford. He's the man of the hour in this particular case. Not me. I'll get the full treatment when I get home, and then only from my immediate family."

Radford shook his head and smiled appreciatively. "You boys have a way of making light of great accomplishments. When we read

about that patrol in *Time* and those picture magazines and the big-city newspapers, we got a keener appreciation for what you'd gone through. Town this size giving so much to the war effort—" he nodded sadly— "Henry Luftin, Dale Hagen, the Tidwell boy, and the other Regis County boys who didn't come back. Three Bronze Stars, one Silver Star, mostly posthumously. And one Medal of Honor," he added proudly. "Regis has a lot to live up to."

Luther stood up suddenly. "Excuse me, please," he said slapping at his trouser pockets. "I'm out of cigarettes again. I'll just slip out to the drugstore—"

"That won't be necessary, Luther." Radford shoved the mahogany box across the desk to him. "Help yourself, son."

Luther took the cigarette and sat down again. Radford leaned back in his chair, the fleshy part of his thighs spreading out wide, taut against the thin summerweight cloth of his sharply pressed trousers as he tipped himself backward and his legs hung down to about three or four inches off the floor. "Well, Luther," he said, "have you been giving any thought to what you'd like to try your hand at?"

Luther flushed, glad that Marcus was off the subject of heroes, now finding he had no answer for this question. He was swimming in strange and deep waters, never having been involved in a conversation with Marcus Radford that directly concerned himself and his future. "I've been thinking on it some," Luther began, and then Bledso's voice intruded, rescuing him from the need to go on.

"As a matter of fact," Harry said, "Luther and I were discussing that point in Washington just before we left for Regis. If you don't mind, Luther—?" He smiled at Luther, who nodded with grateful relief. Bledso looked back into Marcus Radford's benign face. "Go right ahead, Lieutenant," Marcus said.

"Well. As you know, Mr. Radford, Luther isn't just a hero to the City of Regis or to Regis County or to the state. Luther Dorman is a national figure in every county of every state in the country."

Marcus said somewhat coolly, "I'll grant you that, Lieutenant. Today, tomorrow, even a week or month or two from now, I'd say you were right. But what comes later, after the war is over in the Pacific and all the boys come home? What happens then? You got an answer for that?"

"I think so, Mr. Radford. At this moment Luther is a big name with a big deed to his credit. That is something for today. I've been thinking that if he took the initiative right now, he wouldn't have to worry when the war is over."

"And just how would he go about doing that? Take the initiative in which direction, would you say, Lieutenant?"

Bledso eyed Marcus Radford calmly and said, "Politics, Mr. Radford."

"Politics?" The question came from Marcus as though it were the most remote thought in his mind.

"Yes, sir. Last night during and after the banquet I made some inquiries about the political situation and learned some interesting things. For one thing, that Congressman Earl Butcher is up for the primaries from this district in a short time. For another, so is the Regis County sheriff. For a third, with your backing as one of the state party leaders, Luther could—"

Radford held up a pink palm to Bledso, wagging it at him from side to side like a railroad warning signal, smiling; but Bledso didn't let the smile fool him; he could see the small bright pinpoints glinting in the banker's eyes.

"Son," Radford said, "where do you get your notions about politics?"

"I guess I come by them honestly enough, sir. My father is Henry Wesley Bledso—"

"State Supreme Court Justice Bledso," Radford finished. "That Bledso, are you? Well, I must say you've got your eye on the ball and I'll have to keep you in mind for someday in the future.

"Now, as you say, I could run Luther for either job you mentioned, or I could send him up to Chancellor to the Assembly, then on to the State Senate someday. But what would he win? A job he isn't prepared to fill? Locally, the only thing we'd be doing by running him for sheriff would be to knock a good, competent man out of office."

"How about—?" Bledso began, but Marcus cut across his words with a raised hand.

"Suppose I tell you how it is, Lieutenant," he said, smiling suavely. "You couldn't be more right about Luther's value in running for some political office. But at the same time you've got to remember that Luther is one of us, one of our own people down here. It would be easy enough to send him up to Chancellor or even Washington while all this hoop-de-do is still warm and fresh in people's minds, but who's going to see to his interests after that? You? What do you do when you're not soldiering—or herding heroes around, Lieutenant?"

Luther watched as Bledso flushed at the pointed, malignant ques-

tion, feeling the rise of Radford's ire beneath the surface smile. In particular, the barb stung Luther, who was now reduced to the position of spectator while these two sat and discussed his future, his fate.

"As soon as I'm released from duty, Mr. Radford, I intend to take the state bar examinations and begin my practice as soon as I've been notified that I've made it. I'll need to take some refresher courses, I know, but that won't be much of a problem. I've always been a good student."

"And where do you think Luther Dorman will be during that year? In some elective office he can't fill. A lamb among the wolves and jackals?"

Luther squirmed silently in his chair, a flush of anger beginning to show on his face. Certainly, he was not angry with Bledso, who was, in his own way, performing an act of personal friendship; certainly it was not at Marcus Radford, who was seemingly looking out for one of "his own." He was angry with his own incompetence, his inadequacy and inability to speak up for himself, take his own part, make his own wants known; in fact, his anger was directed at his own impotence, the immaturity that would not permit him to voice his own needs or wants. Bledso had no answer for Marcus's last question. He glanced at Luther, then back at Radford. Marcus took up where he had left off, feeling his victory was close at hand.

"All right then, Lieutenant, I guess that puts it up to Luther." He turned to a richly embarrassed Luther. "What do you think, son?" he asked. "You want to throw yourself into the political pot against experienced men like Earl Butcher and Will Bartly, or just take it easy for a little while and let me come up with some ideas?"

Both men were looking at him, and Luther realized it had been put to him in such a way that demanded an answer—an immediate answer—and now he found himself completely alone and over-matched. His decision would have to be made as they sat and watched him. Go against the man to whom the Dorman family had been beholden as long as he could remember; who could, if he wanted, throw them off the small patch of ground they lived on; forget all about Carrie, Jud, Miss Bethann, and try to make it on his own with the Radford strength and organization against him—?

It was Bledso again who rescued him from the need to answer, his mind sharp and able to see Marcus Radford's strong position and strategy, feeling that if Luther did file against Butcher or Bartly, it would be with Radford firmly opposed to him. And Radford was

right about Luther being better off in Regis with his powerful patronage behind him, Bledso knew very well.

"Luther," he said, "I think that's the best solution we've heard yet, and I'm sure you will agree with Mr. Radford's judgment." He looked down at his wrist watch and stood up. "You know, gentlemen, if I get over to the hotel and pack right away, I can get a train out to Chancellor and be home sometime tonight. I might even have time to call my mother and warn her I'm on my way."

"Sure you could," Marcus agreed affably, rising with Bledso, wrapping a long arm around his shoulders and smiling genially. "We're all sorry you can't stay longer, Lieutenant, but we know how anxious you must be to get home. Thanks a lot for looking out for our boy here. We'll take good care of him and don't you fret a whisker about that. Give my regards to your daddy, and any time you or he are down this way—"

8.

In their hotel room Harry Bledso folded and packed the clothing he had taken out of his bag on arrival and hung in the closet. Luther was gathering his toilet articles to put into the leather kit, zipped it closed and handed it to Bledso. "I sure hate to see you leave, Harry. I'm going to feel lost without you."

Bledso grinned. "You'll do all right, Luther. I only hope you don't feel I let you down with Radford, but my guess would be that if you play it his way, you won't have too much to worry about. He'll make you a good friend. Either that, or one hell of an enemy if you go up against him. Just keep your ears and eyes open, and if you ever feel as though you need bucking up, you call me or come up to Chancellor to see me. I'll leave my home address and phone number with you. After this year is over, I ought to have my exams behind me and begin to practice there."

"Sure. Sure. I'll write you anyway just to let you know how I'm getting along," Luther said, knowing he wouldn't.

"Sure. You do that," Bledso replied as he continued packing, knowing full well that Luther would not write; that unless something accidental happened, this was probably the end of their friendship—one final, personal casualty of the war.

At the station, they walked along the concrete platform and stood beside the train waiting for the conductor's final "All aboard!"

"We've got only a few minutes left, Luther," Bledso said, "so let

me say this." He pointed to the blue ribbon. "You know that this medal has to be cut into thirteen slices and that only one of the slices belongs to you. The others belong to the twelve men who were out there in the forest with you. What's most important is that you were the only one to come out of it alive and what happened out there in the dark is something that nobody on earth knows but you."

As Bledso spoke with a sense of finality to his words, Luther began to feel the black panic of aloneness returning. He had felt it when he realized that Claudia was lost to him; next, when he heard Joel Harris's words of good-by, but both times he had had Bledso with him. Now he knew that this was his last friendly contact with the Army. When Harry Bledso stepped on the train and it pulled out of the station, he would be standing all alone. This was a void that no one else would be able to know or feel or understand—not Carrie, Mr. Marcus, or Bethann. No one. The closeness he felt toward Bledso transcended that which he had felt for Dale Hagen; or was it that he had substituted the lieutenant for Dale? Now, suddenly, he felt an urge to confess the thing that lay heavily upon his mind, coming to him with an actual physical pain in his chest. He put out a hand and said haltingly, "Harry, listen. Let me tell you. *Let me—*" The words burst from him with passion, but Bledso interrupted him. "I haven't got time to hear all you want to tell me, Luther. Save it for another time and then maybe you won't have to regret having said it. All I want to tell you now is something my father said to me when I first left home to go to college, the first time I'd ever had to leave home and live among other people without the comfort and support of my own family close around me.

"You listen to this and see if you can remember it because right now I think it can be the answer to most of the problems you might find facing you in the near future. These are the words of an ancient philosopher who lived some 300 or 400 years before Christ. What he said was:

*Let thy speech be better than
silence; or be silent.*

"His name was Dionysius and he couldn't have given anyone any better advice if he were living here and now and talking directly to you himself instead of me telling it to you. What he meant in your case was this: If what you are going to say to someone, no matter who, won't be any better than if you had kept quiet, then the best thing for you to do is to keep quiet and listen.

"That's all I can say in so short a time, Luther." Bledso smiled, holding out his hand. Luther took it into his own without smiling in return. The conductor came down from the train step to the concrete platform, waved his hand, and began to call, "All aboard-r-r-r-d!" Bledso said, "Good luck, chum," and went up the car steps, turned left toward the forward cars. Luther turned and walked out of the train shed quickly and without looking back.

He knows something, Luther thought, as he rode back to the hotel in a taxi. At least he suspects that everything up there that night wasn't the way the papers told it. He knew it when I started to tell him, but he was smart enough, kind enough, not to let me spill it out, then be sorry for it later on. But he knew. He knew. I don't know how he knew it, but he did. I could see it in his face. That's why he gave me something to hang on to. *Let thy speech be better than silence; or be silent.* I got to remember that.

When the taxi pulled up to the hotel entrance, he began to reach in his pocket for the fare, but the cab driver waved him off with a smile, saying, "It's all right, Sergeant, all taken care of. Compliments of Regis," and drove off, leaving him standing beside the colored doorman.

He looked down the street, turned to go into the hotel, then turned back again quickly to stare at the peaked fore-and-aft cap sitting at a jaunty angle on a tall, brawny Negro's head. A quick flash of recognition went through his mind and he moved quickly down the walk to make certain he was right.

It was Robbie. Robbie Tilebin, who had worked as handyman at the Hall. Robbie in uniform and in Regis. Now, within a few steps of him, he noticed that just as he himself had done so not too long ago, Robbie was supporting himself on two stout, rubber-tipped canes. He walked haltingly beside a tall, pretty woman several shades lighter than Robbie's deep cocoa, almost brown, coloring. She was dressed in a light tan linen dress, her straight hair piled atop her head. She was looking up into Robbie's face as he raised his head to laugh at something she had said; and when he did, she smiled shyly and clutched his arm, held it tightly, possessively. They walked along slowly, inching ahead in the warm sun, enjoying the day and each other.

Luther came up swiftly behind them, passed a few steps ahead, then turned to make sure of his identification. As they approached him, he said quietly, "Hello, Robbie."

Robbie turned away from the woman and saw Luther standing before him. The smile that had faded from his face momentarily came back now, wider than before. "Hidy, Luther!" he said as he stopped, gripping his two canes tightly to steady himself. "*Master Sergeant* Dorman, I mean. If my hands weren't so busy hanging onto these canes, I'd sure give you the big salute that ribbon rates. My, my! You sure made it, didn't you?"

Luther smiled in return. "I guess so, Robbie. You got back, so I guess you made it, too. I'm sure glad to see you did."

"Yeah. I guess I made it, too, but not in one piece," Robbie said more soberly now.

Luther looked at the cluster of ribbons and stars over the left breast pocket of Robbie's neatly pressed uniform shirt and saw a duplicate of his own purple bar, edged on both sides with white. "I'm home winding up a thirty-day furlough from Walter Reed Hospital up in Washington. Yes, sir." He stood resting his weight on his left leg and the cane in his left hand, pointing to Luther's blue ribbon with his right—the blue ribbon that sat by itself over the row of ribbons and the Purple Heart beneath it. The beaming smile on Robbie's face widened again as he winked in admiring appreciation. "Man! That's somethin'! The first time I ever saw the Big One. And I know they don't give them out just for good conduct or target practice."

As Robbie spoke, Luther was paying closer attention to the other ribbons Robbie wore: the African-Italian-European theater ribbon with three small bronze battle stars attached; there were several other ribbons he could not readily identify. The one that sat alone above the others was the one he did recognize at once: narrow white, broad red, narrow white, medium blue, narrow white, broad red, and narrow white—the Bronze Star "for heroic or meritorious achievement or service against an enemy not involving aerial flight."

Luther pointed to it now, said, "That's something mighty special too, Robbie. You got it pretty bad, didn't you?"

Now he looked up and noticed the girl who clung to Robbie's right arm so protectively. She stood holding Robbie's arm, looking away from the two men, self-conscious to be seen standing here in public with a white man on equal, friendly terms—the man all Regis had proclaimed its favorite son and hero only yesterday. Robbie now raised the cane in his right hand and rapped sharply on his right leg. A harsh, solid sound came through, partially muffled by the cloth of his trousers. He swayed off balance slightly and the girl

moved closer beside him quickly to offer herself as a firm support. Robbie leaned against her and steadied himself.

"Excuse me, Luther. This is Lida-Mae, my wife. Lida-Mae, this is Sergeant Luther Dorman. You heard me talk about him before the war. His daddy farms a little place next to the Hall. I guess I've known Luther since he was fourteen-fifteen years old, ever since I come back to Regis and went to work for Mr. Radford."

Lida-Mae's large eyes looked up at Luther, then turned downward shyly. She murmured acknowledgment of his "Hello, Lida-Mae," and now stood silently beside Robbie again.

"What happened, Robbie?" Luther asked.

"Oh, I took a piece of a land mine on the beach around Salerno in September of '43. The Army doctors spent over a year trying to save my leg, but they ended up having to take it off just below the knee. But they fixed me up with a new one and I'm just getting used to it. *Whoo!*" He laughed as if he had thought of a joke. "You know something? You won't believe it, but like I've been telling Lida-Mae, some nights I still get a mean pain in my right toes, sometimes all the way up to my ankle, other times up to my knee! Now that's something for a man with no toes or ankle and not much of a knee!"

Luther smiled politely without feeling like smiling at all. "You infantry?" he asked.

Robbie grinned. "No. They shipped us colored boys down to Texas and put us in a cavalry outfit, mechanized. Mechanical horses, they called us. Tanks to give the infantry support was what we were. A real sharp, hot outfit, too, man! Come time to go overseas, they tell us in the staging area that we'd been changed over to a labor battalion. All that training to make us fighting men gone for nothing but a pick and shovel gang, maybe to unload ships, stuff like that.

"Man, we did a real burn. Come this Salerno show and we're sitting out there on a Liberty ship waiting for the fighting men to get finished with the real work so we could come in and unload the rations and ammo and supplies for them to use on the push north. Man, that was a bang! bang! slam! and wham! thing. We're looking out ashore wondering if we weren't just plain crazy wanting to be fighting men, because right then it looked like the smart boys, fighting men or no, would rather be where we were, sitting there like we were in a G.I. movie looking at the thing happening instead of being right up there in it.

"Pretty soon they came along and started landing us in LCVP's, pulling in to that beach. So we get in there, and then our planes come and begin to work them Germans and Eyeties over, and we begin to move up a teeny bit. When our planes leave, the Germans counterattacked us and pushed us back down to the beach again. We get pinned down good and hard and you don't get off your belly more than ass-high—excuse me, Lida-Mae—for two or three days. Old Colonel Henshaw, he said, 'Well, you colored boys been itching for a fight, so go ahead and fight!' And that's just what we do. We sure do. We bust through and I'm up there in the front line like a damn fool without any sense in his melonhead. Just between you and me, Luther, I didn't even know what I was doing up there, except that there I am. First thing happens is a live grenade comes flying at me, hits the soft sand right smack in front of me. Somebody else hollers, 'Duck!' So I duck down, grab the grenade, and throw it back. We were cutting through their lines a little later when I got the pleasure and privilege to be the first one to step on the first land mine.

"Old Colonel Henshaw, he got me sent back to a hospital, then they put me on a hospital ship, and first thing you know, I'm back in the States. Man, that was the best ride I ever had in my life. They flew me from New York to Washington and put me in that Walter Reed Hospital, the biggest one I ever saw. Then they gave me a Purple Heart and a few more and later on come the Bronze Star." Robbie stopped talking and they stood looking at each other.

Suddenly, and both felt it at once as they stood admiring each other's decorations, there was between them a new and close feeling that had no bearing on time, age, or color. If they had not been standing on a principal street in Regis, but alone out in the woods or in a cotton field somewhere, they might have easily shaken hands firmly or clasped an arm around each other in the way close, warm friends show a deep, masculine affection for one another. The closest they got to it now was to grin knowingly at each other.

"Man, that's sure something," Robbie said again, his head bobbing toward the light blue bar with the five white stars upon it.

"That one of yours ain't anything to sneeze at, Robbie," Luther said. "They taking good care of you?"

"They're doing mighty fine, Luther. Mighty fine. When I get out of the hospital, the government's going to pay me a real good pension. Over \$150 a month for the rest of my life, even if I live to be a 110 years old. Yes, sir," he grinned, "and the way I feel right now, I'm going to make it to 120!"

Lida-Mae said, "I think you'd better rest awhile, Robbie. You been on that leg too long already."

"Sure, honey, sure," Robbie said. He turned back to Luther. "You say 'howdy' to your daddy and Miss Carrie for me. Say—" he smiled with his own shyness now— "the folks over in Buckeytown are giving me this Bronze Star party tonight. You want to see a real blow-out, you look in, will you?"

Luther smiled. "Good for you, Robbie. I might just do that if I can get away. Where will it be?"

Now Robbie laughed aloud. "Man, you won't need any directions. You just come over to Buckeytown. You'll *hear* where it is. You sure will." He stopped laughing and said seriously, "I hope you'll come over, Luther. I'm at the end of my furlough and I got to leave to go back to Walter Reed on Sunday night. They're going to teach me to walk without the canes and do a lot of other things I never even did before, when I had both my legs." He turned away from Lida-Mae for a moment and said in a low voice, "I'd like to ask your advice about something kind of personal."

"I'll try my best, Robbie," Luther replied soberly. "That's as close as I can come to a promise."

Chapter 11

1.

Luther passed through the lobby intending to go into the dining room for lunch, but when he glanced in and saw the room crowded with merchants, civic officials, and executives from nearby stores and offices, decided to go directly to his room and have a sandwich and glass of milk sent up and thus remain inconspicuous. When the food came, he lay stretched out on the bed, stripped to the waist, the ceiling fan offering little relief from the oppressive heat. The young boy put the tray down upon the table and drew a chair up to it, whisked the napkin from the tray. Luther got up off the bed, signed the check, and added a fifty-cent tip for the grateful youth, thinking that this was the first money—even though it was someone else's—that he had spent since arriving here yesterday. Now the grinning boy pushed a hotel menu toward him and asked him to sign it. When he had scrawled his name across it, the boy remained, stared with open-eyed fascination at the scar on Luther's chest, asked, "Is 'at wheah you got wounded, Mist' Do'man?"

Luther wheeled, reaching quickly for his shirt to cover the accusing welt of reddish purple. "That's it," he said abruptly, almost angrily.

"Mist' Do'man," the thin voice piped, "how many Germans you kill? Some says twenny, some says fifty, maybe sixty."

Luther's lips compressed tightly, his eyes closing as if to shut out the inevitable reminder, but when he opened them, the boy was still there before him waiting patiently for an answer to take back to the kitchen and service pantry with him. The sudden impulse to order the boy out of the room came over him, then he remembered what Captain Harris had told him in Washington before the tour started.

"Luther, these tours won't last forever. The faster they go, the easier they go and the sooner they are over. Just remember that everything you do now, everything you say, will be seen and heard.

by the public—by men, women, and children, who will report and repeat everything they see and hear at work, at school, in their homes, and at play. Much of what you say will be distorted if you're not careful, so for Christ's sake, don't louse yourself up, and me and Bledso with you. Only when you are in a room all by yourself, or with me or Harry, can you speak and think and show your true feelings. In a little while this will get on your nerves so badly, you'll want to scream or explode, but temporarily you're not an ordinary individual as such; you're a symbol and, take it from me, that's not an easy thing to be. Whatever else you may believe right now, you'll find out that the public is as fickle as a whore on a Saturday payday near an Army camp, so remember that the admiration and affection and respect they feel for you at any given moment can erupt into violent hatred within minutes if you get hot under the collar and blow your stack in public. Don't step on any of those tender toes and above all else—"

He turned to the boy and wondered what he could tell this fourteen- or fifteen-year-old. And then he recalled how back in Chicago Bledso had answered this very question when someone had asked him how many Germans Hero Dorman had killed and Harry had looked at the man calmly, taken a long drag on his cigarette, and said, "No man knows in the heat of a battle action how many men he has killed, because war, most of the time, is such an impersonal thing. You shoot at phantoms and shadowy ghosts from behind a barricade, a tree, a wall, a tank, a hedgerow. You throw grenades into machine-gun nests, houses, cellars, and windows without knowing how many die; and later, when you have time to think, you're glad you don't know, because if you did, you would only stay awake longer with your guilt. Death isn't like golf or baseball or any other game where you keep a score in order to determine who wins."

He now said to the boy, "You tell them downstairs that I don't know. In a war you don't keep score like you do in a pool game."

The boy nodded understandingly. "Yes, suh. I guess 'at's so."

His taste for the food had left him, and he lit a cigarette and went back to the bed, again remembering back over the months since he had made that patrol. He ran his hand over the self-inflicted scar on his chest, then dropped it down to the inside of his left thigh, feeling the two indentations under the thin cloth of his trousers, thinking of them as badges of guilt he could not take off as easily as he could remove a medal.

What would the American public and the United States government feel, he wondered, if they knew that their hero, Luther Dor-

man, had killed only one man, an American soldier, to emerge as a hero at the expense of a dozen others? A dry, hysterical sobbing shook him and he sat up, clenching his hands between his knees to still the trembling in them. He thought of the editorial in last evening's *Herald*, the most recent account of his alleged bravery, the step-by-step action— *Oh, Christ!* he thought. *By now it's so far from the truth that even I can't recognize any small detail or part of it. I'm almost ready to believe it myself!*

He had never imagined there could be so many questions for the press to ask, questions like, "Captain Harris, you've seen a number of heroes in this war; you, too, Lieutenant. Tell us, what makes a hero?"

And Harris's cool answer: "I think it must be the same thing that makes a man a success in business, in a profession, in politics, in government service, or in a living show on the stage as an actor. Everything and everyone in the right place at the right time and the bell or alarm clock or cue going off at exactly the right time. At that magical moment a man decides to make a purchase of a certain stock, buy a piece of a business, run for a certain office, or, in this case, to make a move that becomes an act of extreme bravery. If the stock makes a spectacular rise, if the business he buys into becomes an outstanding success, if he wins election to the sought office, or, in this case, if the act he commits is one of extraordinary courage or daring or valor, you have a hero in each field. If, on the other hand, the reverse is the situation, you have something less than success, the ordinary, perhaps even failure. The fine line that separates genius from idiot is often the tiny, slender margin that separates success from failure."

"Then, Captain, what you are actually saying is that—"

He forced these thoughts out of his mind, replacing them with others—of Ruth-Rachel and Lutie, wondering how soon he would be able to get up courage enough to call on them; to try, as Carrie had suggested last night, to alleviate the bitterness and pain they felt; who might at this very moment be feeling their despair all the more now that he had returned to rekindle their grief. This was hardly more pleasant than his other thoughts, and he switched to Bethann and, with a sudden start, wondered how it happened that Mr. Marcus, even Carrie, had failed to mention her until he had spoken her name first. Now he began conjuring in his mind what their first meeting would be like, for certainly he would be seeing her soon. He thought of the hundreds of lonely moments when he

had whispered touching, tender messages of love to her, across the deserts of Africa, into Italy, England, France, and Germany; had spoken to her as though she were with him, saying words that leaped glibly from his mind to his lips—all of this while she was thousands of miles away; and now, here in this room, not more than eight or ten miles from Radford Hall, he fought to remember those words, unable to recall them to his mind.

The phone rang. He let it ring twice more before he reached for it and spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Luther?" It was Marcus Radford. "Got to thinking, Luther, this being Saturday, you might want to run out to the house to see your sister and father. Can't have you riding around here on the buses, so I'm sending you one of the cars from the Hall. I told Newton to leave it in front of the hotel for you with the keys. You use it today and tomorrow and come in to see me at the bank on Monday. By that time you'll have a lot of things out of the way and we can have a serious talk."

Luther said, "Well, now, that's mighty nice of you, Mr. Radford, and I—"

"Don't mention it, boy. Only too glad to do it for you. By the way, you figure on having dinner at Radford Hall with us Monday night. You haven't made any other plans for then, have you?"

"No, sir."

"All right then, Luther, we'll expect you for dinner." Marcus hung up and Luther sat with the receiver in his hand, feeling a new intoxication bubbling through him, the knowledge that he would be seeing Bethann no later than Monday night. Marcus had said "*we'll*" expect you. No "I." "We."

With a feverish impatience he got up, went into the bathroom and washed his face, ran the cool washcloth over his chest, combed his hair. He put on a fresh pair of khaki trousers and shirt, bundling the old into the paper bag marked "Laundry." His small peaked cap was sweat-streaked and he changed it for a fresh one, proud of the light blue infantry piping that ran along its edges. As he put it on, the phone rang again. It was the desk clerk.

"Sergeant Dorman, Mr. Radford's man just left a car for you in front of the hotel. I have the keys at the desk for you. No, sir. No hurry. Any time you're ready. No, sir, it's not blocking anything."

The road ran in a straight ribbon to the north, then curved to the right. Within a few minutes he was able to pick out the small cottage in which he had been born. Beyond it to the east, sitting im-

periously on the crest of the rise, he could make out the faint lines of Radford Hall, standing regally like a queen among a court of magnificent, ages-old oaks, magnolias, and majestic pines. He depressed the accelerator and the car leaped forward in response, and now he was within easy range of his own home; and as he got closer to it, he noticed with shocking surprise that the house that had for so many years been a weathered-gray was now painted a gleaming white, with sparkling lemon-yellow shutters. It seemed larger, too; a wing had been added to the side rear; and where once the yard ended and the farm began, the house and yard were now wire-fenced in; beyond the fence the ground had been turned into pasture. Where he had once toiled and labored, several horses roamed aimlessly over the grass and a small herd of cows lay in the shade of scattered oaks, all fat and sleek with good grazing.

He pulled into the lane that led to the house and turned the car into the new curved driveway that had been formed here. He sounded the horn three times and started to get out, then saw the front door open as Carrie came out on the porch and down the steps toward him.

"Hello, Carrie," he greeted, stepping into her welcoming arms.

"This is more like it," Carrie said with a happy smile. "All that fuss in town there, it didn't seem like it was you sitting there, not even looking like yourself. Now you're home, it's more like Luther Dorman instead of Sergeant Dorman." She motioned toward the Radford car and Luther told her of Marcus's generosity.

As they entered the house, Luther said earnestly, "Listen, Carrie. Let's you and me forget this hero business. I never was a hero to you before the war, so I don't feel like a hero to you now. Just your younger brother that was always needing to have his ears scrubbed or his tail tanned for something he got into he wasn't supposed to."

Carrie put an arm around his waist, he with one around hers, as they walked along the hallway into the kitchen.

"Where is he?" Luther asked.

"In his room taking his afternoon nap."

"I didn't know if I did right or wrong, but I stopped at Brinkley's and brought out six bottles of happiness for him."

"He won't need it for a while. We've been seeing he keeps himself supplied."

"We? Who's we?"

"Mr. Marcus and me." Suddenly she looked up at him, caught the clouded expression on his face. "Why, what's the matter?"

"Well, you tell me, will you? What's this all about, the house all

painted and spruced up inside and out, an extra bedroom and bath added on, the farm turned into grazing pasture, you all duded up in fine clothes, your hair done up fancy and—" he picked up one of her hands and inspected it—"your fingernails all manicured up. I didn't think you could get all that done on my allotment and your salary."

Carrie smiled, undisturbed by the innuendo. "Well, now, you sure went and got yourself all grown up, didn't you? Now you're asking the questions of me instead of answering them. Besides, you're the one started the whole thing."

"Me? How?"

"Well, you went and became a hero, didn't you? As soon as you were wounded and the word came back, the newspaper started calling about you. For a while things were quiet, and then some captain came down here from Washington and told us that you were a big hero and pretty soon the President was going to give you a big medal. Then Mr. Marcus and Mr. Thomas and the captain came by, and they decided that a lot of things would have to be done to pretty up the place so that when the reporters and photographers and radio people came down to ask questions and all, the house would look fit and proper for a hero's home. First, Mr. Marcus brought men in to paint the house and fix it up, then he said I'd have to get all outfitted in the best stores in town and all prettied up in Miss Beulah's Beauty Shoppe, and while all that was going on, he brought in some colored help to take care of Pa and gave out the word that he was too sick to be disturbed.

"Meantime, he put a crew of men working around the clock to add a new bedroom and a real bathroom and all, put in the flower garden and a driveway."

"Took a lot of money, didn't it, Carrie?"

"I guess; but Mr. Marcus said it was the duty and responsibility of the community to do it because of what you did for the community and the whole country. He wouldn't even let me come back to work. Just kept on paying my salary and all the expenses on this place. And now, here we are."

Luther nodded. "You know something, Carrie," he said, "if only for one reason, I'm glad it happened the way it did."

"What's that?"

"You. In my whole lifetime I don't remember you looking as nice and pretty and dressed up as you were last night, the way you look right now. I remember years ago when I was just a little tyke, after Ma died, I used to think about you as if you were my mother. Then

last night I saw you dancing with that fellow used to come courting you until Pa drove him off, the one wanted you to run off and marry him."

Carrie sighed. "You mean Fred Archer."

"He's the one. I saw him dance with you a time or two last night, and that whole night come back to me, the night you turned him down and he walked off the porch. I know you did that because of me. And Pa."

Carrie said, "That was Fred. He got married about two years after Pa ran him off. Fred just gave up waiting and married Eunice Lang whose pa owned the boatyard down the river."

"You liked him a lot, didn't you, Carrie?"

She nodded. "I liked him a lot," she said soberly, slowly. "A whole lot."

He looked more closely at her and marveled at the youthfulness of her that he had never seen before. She's four years older now, and she looks younger to me than she ever did before the war. What a change in her! And what had done it? Money. Money. My allotment and some of Marcus Radford's money. And with Marcus Radford's name in his mind, he remembered the conversation he had overheard between Captain Harris and Bledso that night in his hotel room when Harris had suggested there might be something between Carrie and Mr. Marcus. He shook his head as though to drive the thought away, but the suspicion was deeply rooted within him, placed there by those few words of a near-total stranger. Even if it were true, he felt the helplessness of trying to bring the subject up to Carrie. Or to Marcus. The way he saw it now, whatever there was between them, if anything, would remain, and nothing he said about it would change things. Somehow, it seemed that his future was tied firmly and irrevocably to the Radfords, one or the other or both, and he would have to play it that way, all the way.

"Did you have lunch?" Carrie asked him, interrupting his train of thought.

"Right now I feel like having a drink to celebrate my homecoming without a lot of people staring down my throat. Have one with me, Car."

Carrie brought two glasses and a bottle to the table and he poured the drinks for them. Carrie bent down and slipped the loafer-type shoes from his feet and he flexed his toes comfortably. "Now I know I'm home." He grinned. "Nothing like this anywhere else I've been. And I've been in some mighty biggety places since I came back to the States."

"Well, I hope you stay around here for good now and forget all

about going anywhere else," she said, sitting across the table from him, raising the glass to clink against his.

"I won't have to, Carrie. They told me in Washington the other day there's an order out that a Medal of Honor winner won't have to go back to the front lines any more. So I guess they won't be sending me out to the Pacific. Anyway, I'm not going anywhere for at least another sixty days, so let's relax until I get some orders. Tell me, how's Miss Bethann? I'n seen hide nor hair of her since I been back and I've seen just about everybody else in Regis County."

Hesitatingly, she replied, "Miss Bethann is all right. Her little girl is about three and a half now and she's pretty as a kitten. Looks just like her mother."

He nodded with a smile, a feeling of lightness inside him. "So you told me. You see much of her?" he asked.

"Not since Mr. Marcus told me I shouldn't come back to work there. Once in a while she'll flit past here on her way somewhere's and stop in for a minute or two."

"She ever ask for me?"

"Once in a while. But then, I haven't seen her much to talk to since all this began to happen back in March. I guess she's been hearing about you from Mr. Marcus, or reading about you in the papers like everybody else. The *Herald's* had a story about you just about every day you were on that tour, with pictures."

He felt a keen disappointment, sensing a reluctance on Carrie's part to pursue the subject of Bethann. "Anybody got any ideas who Harriet's pa might be?" he asked.

She looked up at him and said without hesitation, "Nobody seems to know, Luther, and Mr. Marcus being who he is, nobody is going around asking any questions. She came back from New Orleans one day during the summer of '42 with the baby and that was it. I was working there at the time she came home. Sudie was with her down in New Orleans, but only after the baby was born."

"And you never wormed it out of Sudie all the time you were up there at the Hall?"

"Wasn't anything anybody could ever worm out of Sudie unless she wanted to talk. You ought to know that," she said abruptly as if to end this subject.

Luther poured another inch of the corn whiskey into his glass, held the bottle for Carrie as she moved her glass toward him for replenishment. He drank his quickly, held the glass up to the window light, squinting at it, a half grin on his face. Carrie turned to him quizzically.

"What are you grinning like that for, Luther? You're acting like

you knew a lot more than I do. I know that's not so because you were away all the time. You been hearing any gossip in town? You might as well tell me now without me digging for it."

He poured another drink for himself. "You want another one?" he asked.

"I haven't finished this one."

"Then finish it and have another one."

She shook her head. "I don't want another one. I shouldn't of had—"

"You better take one," he said. "What I'm going to tell you might lift the scalp right off your head unless you got something like this to keep it glued on."

"You're talking like you're drunk already. And on two drinks."

Luther said, "Drink it down, Carrie. You're going to need it."

She studied his face, watched the grin fade from it. He poured more whiskey from the bottle until it nearly reached the two-inch mark in both glasses. They clinked the glasses together. Luther downed his in two gulps while Carrie sipped hers slowly. "Now you tell me what you've got on your mind, Luther," she said.

"All right. Now you hold on tight. I know who Harriet's father is. I know the man fathered that young 'un."

"You—?" Carrie gasped. "Now how in the world would *you* know a thing like that? That's been kept a sworn secret. Only—"

"I don't care who swore who to the secret. I know who he was. And *nobody* else knows unless Miss Bethann herself told it."

Carrie stared at him unbelievably, remembering the day Sudie told her about Garrett Harwick and how Miss Bethann had gone to him to tell him she was pregnant, and when she returned home to tell Mr. Marcus that everything was all right, there was going to be a big wedding at Radford Hall and they would have a lot of work facing them. *How in the world could Luther have found that out?* And if he had learned it so soon after returning to Regis, how many others knew about it, she wondered. "I don't know how you can know about it, Luther," she said coolly.

"Less Miss Bethann told you, of course you don't. But I don't care anything about that, Carrie, I tell you *I know!*" He pounded the glass on the table for emphasis, his voice beginning to show annoyance with her doubt. He poured another drink for himself and drank it. Carrie put her own glass down and stood up, and he rose to his feet to face her, flushed with determination. He took her by both arms and stared at her.

"Listen, Carrie," he said insistently, "I'm going to tell you. Now

you hold on and listen. *I'm the father of that girl. I'm Harriet's daddy.*"

Carrie's mouth dropped open. "You? You? Luther, you're *crazy!* You're just absolutely crazy to say or think a thing like that. For God's sake, what happened to you over there in Germany? Did you lose your mind? You must have to be saying a foolish thing like that."

He grinned at her without saying a word.

"Luther, don't you dare repeat a thing like that to anyone else. It's just crazy and you know it. It just *couldn't* be!"

"No? And why couldn't it? Just why couldn't it? You yourself wrote me and told me when the baby was born, didn't you? Well, then, let me just freshen up your memory for you. Here, you better sit down and finish your drink. I told you you'd need it."

Carrie drank from her glass and Luther poured two more for them. This time there was no touching of glass rims, and he drank the whiskey down as soon as he had stopped pouring. He sat at the table across from her, hands clasped on the tabletop before him. "How—?" she began and stopped.

"Listen, Carrie, and you'll remember. I know you will because I can pinpoint it for you. You were starting to get supper ready that afternoon. Before that, I came in from fixing the fence with Robbie Tilebin, and I got a towel and some soap and a change of clothes and went off to the creek to take a bath. That was on a Saturday night and I remember it easy enough because it was the night before the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor. You had supper ready and—*now* do you remember? I came home the next day, in the afternoon it was, and you were sitting here in the kitchen with the radio on the table in front of you, and you started to cry and holler at me, asking me where I was, where I'd been all night, that the Japs were bombing Pearl County and you were scared. You remember now?"

She nodded her head dumbly. "What's that got to do with it?" she asked.

"That was the night, Carrie. *That was the night!*"

She could hear the passion in his words, see the excitement mounting in him. This was no joke with him, she saw. He really believed what he was saying; she dreaded to hear his next words.

"*That was the night!*" he re-emphasized his words to make sure she had heard and understood him. "The reason I didn't come home for supper was that I run into Miss Bethann near the woods and we went up to that old play cabin of hers and we stayed there together all night. We did! Don't you believe me? I ain't lying to you. *I'm*

telling you the truth! We stayed there and we slept in the same bed together, the both of us. That was the night. Just like a man and wife, Carrie, her and me. And that baby, Harriet, she's my daughter. Mine and Miss Bethann's!"

She sat staring up at him. No. *No!* she told herself. You can't believe that, Luther! You can't! It's not so. *It's not! I know it's not!* I don't care what happened that night, you're not Harriet's father. You're crazy to think so. Even crazier to *say* so. A man is already dead because *he had been the real father!* By Miss Bethann's own admission to Mr. Marcus.

She shook her head wearily, and Luther turned and went to the kitchen window and stared out into the yard for a few moments. The silence in the room was choked with unsaid words. Carrie turned toward him and saw his back, started to go to him, but he heard her moving in his direction and went to the door and stepped outside.

2.

How could she tell him, she wondered. From the depth of the passion in his voice, she knew now that this was a dream he had carried locked within himself those many, many months he had spent in Europe. He was outside now, walking around a bit to let the alcohol wear off. She moved to get supper started, early as it was, hoping it would help to sober him up to a point where he would listen to reason; but what she feared most was that in his present state he might jump into the car and go storming up to the Hall to talk to Miss Bethann, demand to see "his daughter."

She began taking a few dishes out of the cupboard, then heard the familiar hawking and throat-clearing and turned around to see Jud standing in the doorway to the kitchen, yawning to display a nearly completely toothless black cavern, wearing the inevitable dirty suit of long underwear even in this heat.

"For the Lord's sake, Pa," she snapped impatiently, "go put some clothes on and wash up like a human being."

"Where's yore ma, gal?" Jud demanded angrily, drawing himself up by using the door's edge to steady himself. Carrie turned around suddenly to face him. "Dead!" she exclaimed with a burst of fury. "Dead is where she is! In her grave where you put her, you—!"

She had not heard the back door open, did not know Luther had come back inside until he took her by the arms and held her. Jud Dorman stared blearily past Carrie at him. "Who're you?" he de-

manded. "Who the hell're you comin' in here puttin' yore hands on my gal like that? Come foolin' 'roun' when—"

"Pa," Luther's voice cut across that of his father's drunken mumbling with a steady, cold calm, "it's me. Luther."

"Lu—Luther? You Luther?"

"I'm Luther, Pa. I just come home."

Jud took a few steps into the kitchen, his hands reaching out to steady himself against a cabinet, a ledge, finally the kitchen table, leaning forward over it to squint at Luther through red-rimmed, watery eyes. "You—you growed out some, boy," he said. "Come an' set a spell. Carrie, go bring in my jug."

Carrie turned around and buried her face against Luther's chest, sobbing quietly. "You see how it is, Luther? You see how it's been all the time?"

"I see, Carrie. You go out for a while and let me talk to him. Go on and find something to do, or just go to your room and lay down." He edged her toward the hallway, and when she had left them, Jud began to call after her.

"All right, all right, where's my jug, Carrie? You bring it on out here to me an' my boy."

Luther stared at the disreputable figure as Jud stood resting his hands on the table, almost sickened by the sight of him. The totally gray hair of his head swirled and tangled over his forehead in scraggly disorder. The gray spikes of his unshaven face and upper lip were more like sharp quills than hair. Dried brown spittle stained both sides of his mouth; the dirt encrusted in his suit of long underwear was thick to the point of cracking in numerous places.

"Pa," Luther said.

Jud turned his face upward toward his son, a foolish grin on his purplish lips.

"Pa, it's me. Luther."

"I know. I know. You done tol' me already." He looked around, searching for Carrie. "Where the hell is 'at lazy, good-for-nothin' sister a yourn? Carriel Carriel Where are you, gal?"

Luther reached across the table and took Jud by the arm, twisting him around so that they came face to face. "You pay me some mind, Pa," he said coldly. "I been listening to you talk language that ain't fit for a dog to hear. I'm back home now and it looks to me like I'm going to be the man of the house now, so you better listen to me. You're going to start behaving yourself like a man is supposed

to. You're going to start taking baths in that nice, new bathroom Mr. Radford built onto this house, and you're going to shave every day. You're going to wear them new clothes he bought for you, and you're going to sit here or on the porch and look like a man instead of a piece of poor white trash that's the laughing stock of all Regis and Buckeytown.

"Now, you'll get your liquor. I'll see to that. But you don't get a single, solitary drop if you ever open your dirty, filthy mouth that way again to Carrie, me, or anybody else. You hear me, Pa? You always were a no-good, mean, selfish man who beat hell out of me and Carrie all the years when we were too little to fight back—and for nothing; but I'm telling you, it's got to stop as of right here and now. I'm going to keep you in whiskey till the day we bury you, and I don't care one goddamn bit how soon it is; but only if you keep yourself clean, shaved, dressed, and your mouth shut tight. You understand me, Pa?"

Jud looked up at Luther, peering through reddened eyes, and Luther could not tell whether there were tears or the natural watery substance he had seen in them earlier. "You ain't my son," Jud said in a low growl. "You ain't Luther. Ain't no son'd ever talk to his pa like you talkin' to me. I'll tell you somethin', mister, my boy Luther comes home, he'll whup the hide off'n you, talkin' to his pa thataway. My boy Luther, he ain't goin' a have no big-mouth like you talkin' to me like you done."

Luther stood up, grabbed hold of Jud by two handfuls of underwear, lifted him up, and dragged him to the window. "Look at me, Pa. Look at me good. I'm Luther. I'm your son, Luther, and you know it. I'm telling you once more. You're going to do like I tell you and behave the way you should, or I'm going to throw you the hell out of here and put you away in the county crazy house. I can do it and you know it. Carrie and me, we can sign the papers and you'll be in the loonybin in twenty-four hours. You're nothing but a common, filthy drunk who can't keep himself clean nor decent, and if you can't take care of yourself, or do as we say, we'll let the county do it for us. But once you're in there, I promise you, Pa, you'll never see the outside of it again. That means you'll never get another drink again as long as you live, and without it, you know well enough you couldn't last more'n two weeks. Now, how you want it, Pa? You going to behave like a man should, or you want to be put in a cage for the rest of your useless life?"

Jud rubbed a forearm across his eyes. Luther released his hold

on the old man, let him brace himself against the window sill, staring up balefully. "Sure," he said in a low dreamlike voice, "sure. Now you're somethin' and I'm only old Jud Dorman, nothin' but a drunk. But before it happened, before I fell off'n Mr. Marcus's roof an' crippled myself up for life, anybody can tell you I was as fine a cabinetmaker as any you could find in the whole South. Ask Mr. Marcus. Ask your sister. Even she knows that much. Ah, the work I done up at the Hall, the fancy carvin' and panelin' I put in that house, the things I built up there.

"That desk in his study, I built that all by myself, and that fireplace, that was the work of an artist. He said, 'I can't believe my eyes, Jud,' he says to me when he seen the first one. 'Wonderful, man, it's wonderful. You got the touch of pure genius in your hands.' That's what Mr. Marcus said."

Luther was listening with a feigned interest to what the old man was saying, nodding as he talked. "Sure, sure, Pa," he agreed.

"You seen it, that fireplace and desk?"

"Sure. Now you go on back to your room and take a nap. I want to talk to Carrie about something."

"Carrie," Jud snorted evilly. "That no-good worthless tramp."

"Pa," Luther said angrily, "you say anything like that again about Carrie and I'll slap you dizzy."

"You don't believe nothin' I say, do you? You think I don' know what goes on? Well, who you think's been payin' for what's been goin' on aroun' here? You think Mr. Marcus is doin' it for nothin'?" The old man nudged an elbow toward Luther, missed him and struck the window frame with it. "Wasn't for your sister Carrie been lettin' Mr. Marcus git to her, none a this would a been done, by sure God!"

Luther struck Jud a hard, open-handed blow, and Jud fell against the wall with the force of it. "You dirty, foul-mouthed son-of-a-bitch!" Luther almost screamed. "You ever say a thing like that again to anybody and I'll lay you wide open. You hear me, goddamn you? I'll kill you!"

Jud began to cry. Luther twisted him around so that their faces were no more than a few inches apart and he could see the tears beginning to flow freely from Jud's eyes. Jud's gaze dropped away to the floor

"Luther," he said.

"Yes, Pa."

"You done hit your pa, Luther."

"I didn't mean to hit you, Pa. I only wanted to yank you around a little so you'll know you can't talk about your own daughter the way you did."

"You hit me, Luther."

"All right, I hit you. And what's more I'm going to do it again until I've knocked some sense into your drunken head. You going to listen to me or ain't you?"

"I'll kill you, boy, hittin' yore own daddy like you done."

"You ain't going to kill nobody. You're just talkin' from twenty-five years ago, back before I was even born. You already killed Ma a long time ago and you by a damned sight ain't going to kill my sister. You listen to me, old man. You put one of your dirty hands to her and I'll kill you myself with my own two bare hands."

"Sure. Sure, I guess you will. Kill your own daddy. I guess that's all you learned to do in that there Army. Taught you a good trade there, killin' people. First you're killin' Germans. Now you're home, you goin' a start killin' yore pa." Jud began to cry, fully overcome with self-pity, head buried in his arms, lying upon the table.

Luther left him there, went into the hall and knocked on Carrie's door. She called for him to come in. She was lying on the bed and started to sit up, dabbing a handkerchief at her eyes. Luther sat down beside her, taking her hand into his, holding it tightly.

"What are we going to do with him, Luther?" she asked.

"I'm sure sorry, Carrie. I know what you've been up against all this time with no life of your own. But I swear to you, I'm going to make it up to you one way or another. He's in there crying now. Let him cry. Don't go in there feeling sorry for him. Let him cry it out of his system. Then I'm going to have one more talk with him that even he'll be able to understand."

"Don't hurt him, Luther. Most of the time he just don't know or understand. He's worse than a child. He don't know if it's real life or just a dream he's in. But sometimes—sometimes—"

"Sure. Sure, Carrie, I know."

A few minutes later they went back to the kitchen. Jud was gone. Carrie went back toward his room and came back with a small smile of pity. "He's trying to trim his beard with a pair of scissors. I think he's going to start keeping himself clean."

Luther said, "Good. Some of what I told him sank in. What we'll do is let him know that as long as he keeps himself clean and dressed and behaves himself, he'll get a daily ration of whiskey. If he won't, we cut it off. That's something even a child can learn to understand." He looked at his watch.

"I've got to go back to town, Carrie. I sort of promised some people I'd look in on them tonight. I'll get something to eat at the hotel, and tomorrow or Monday I'll come out with my clothes and move in for good. Don't you worry about him now, because I'll be around to keep him in line."

She smiled her gratitude to him. "If you get a chance, Luther, don't forget to look in on Lutie Hagen and Ruth-Rachel. I don't guess it'll be easy for you, but they'll want to hear anything you can tell them about Dale, how he—well—died. I guess they've got to know, and you'll have to see them sometime sooner or later."

"Sure. Sure, Carrie. If I get a chance, I'll run by and see them. They still living in Aunt Lutie's house?"

She nodded. "They're both living in the same place. Though I don't see how Ruth-Rachel puts up with her. That woman's gone 'most clean out of her mind ever since they got word that Dale was dead."

Luther kissed Carrie's cheek and she put her arms around him and kissed him in return. "Don't worry, Carrie," he said. "I'll go see them. If I can help in some way, I'll be glad to."

The sun had not gone down fully when Luther returned to the hotel. The dining room was almost empty when he passed, and he decided to have his supper and get it over with. He went in and ordered, and when he had finished, the day was still light. He went to his room, showered, and put on a new suit of suntans. He went out and got into the car and drove out tree-shaded Langer Drive toward the old County Road where Lutie and Dale had lived together before Dale brought Ruth-Rachel home as his bride. The house sat back at the end of a narrow lane with ancient, widespreading oaks lining both sides. About fifty yards from the main road the lane opened up into a wide circle, and in the center of the circle stood the one-storied house with green shutters. A porch ran the length of the front and, reaching up to use the porch rails as a trellis, a profusion of red, white, and yellow roses mingled with ivy leaves curled around the rail supports and ran up the sides of the house.

Luther drove up the dusty, rutted lane to the clearing in front of the house. As he came in sight of the front porch, he saw the outline of a figure, dressed fully in black, rise up from the porch swing and come to the post nearest the top step. In the dim shadow he thought this would be Lutie Hagen, dressed in somber mourning. He got

out of the car and came up the steps, and not until then did he make the form out to be that of Ruth-Rachel, but so different a Ruth-Rachel that he was momentarily stunned by her outrageous appearance.

Dressed completely in a shapeless black dress that fell below the calves of her legs, she wore no make-up. Her hair was pulled back tightly into a knot at the nape of her neck and for the moment she seemed old and haggard; and yet, at closer inspection, he was at once aware of her as he had never been of any woman in his life. Her face was scrubbed clean, the natural red tint of her lips standing out softly over her stark paleness. Now she pulled the black dress in at the waist and held the folds behind her, outlining the fine long lines of her body beneath the anonymous black garment. Her lips, unsmiling, were partly open, and her eyes told him she knew who he was as he stood on the top step facing her.

"Hello, Ruth-Rachel," Luther said quietly.

"Hello, Luther. I'm glad to see you home safe," she replied softly.

"Thanks, Ruth-Rachel." There was a pause as their eyes held and he began to grow self-conscious of his awkwardness in her presence. "Is Aunt Lutie home?" he asked.

"She—she's in her room. Asleep. You want to come up and sit? She may wake up in a little while. She's been sleeping most of the afternoon. Please sit awhile, Luther."

She led the way to the porch swing and it creaked noisily as they sat in it. Ruth-Rachel smiled wanly. "Needs oiling. It's not good, two women living alone like this without a man's hand to put to the things that need doing around a house."

Luther said, "You don't—look—the same."

"I don't guess I am the same, Luther. Not any more'n you're the same as you were four years ago."

"No. I guess not. How's Aunt Lutie?"

"I don't honestly know, Luther. She—well, it hit her hard, this thing with Dale. Real hard. Then there was the baby dying back in '42."

"Dale didn't know, did he? Not from the way he talked, he didn't know the baby died. I didn't know until yesterday. Carrie told me."

"No, Dale didn't know," she said quietly. "The baby died seven months after he was born. I gave him his bath and put him to sleep in his basket out on the porch with a net over him so's the flies and mosquitoes wouldn't bother him. Lutie was sitting right here on the porch swing and I went in to take my bath, it was so sticky. I asked her to look at him once in a while to make sure he was all right."

Ruth-Rachel began to sob softly. "When I finished, I dressed and came out here—" she pointed to a corner of the porch no more than eight feet away—"to look at him. He was dead. Smothered to death. He just died there in his basket. And her. Lutie. She was laying here across this same swing we're sitting in, asleep." Suddenly she swiveled around to face Luther, cried out angrily, "Asleep? She was drunk. *Drunk*, Luther. Just like she's drunk in her room right now; drunk and sleeping it off, the psalm-singing old crow!"

There was an awkward pause and Luther squirmed uncomfortably as Ruth-Rachel's voice continued droning on. "Maybe it was a good thing Dale died without knowing. When it happened, I hadn't been writing to him for a long time. I was so mad at him because he made out his allotment to Lutie instead of to me, his wife. So I didn't have it in me to start out writing again by telling him about—well, about Bobby-Joe dying like that. I couldn't do it, not without telling him it was her fault that his son was dead. And all the time Lutie was at me, praying, preaching, and cursing me, trying to make out that I was to blame. I wanted to move out. God, how I wanted to move out! but she swore she'd go to the sheriff and tell him I killed the baby on purpose—because I was mad at Dale for making his allotment out to her and so I could be free to go out and carry on with the men in town and get some money for myself that way.

"I didn't have a cent of my own. The baby was dead and Lutie was threatening to have me locked up. She was just crazy mean enough to do it, too. And that's the way it's been with that crazy old hag. She's just a common old drunk who needs me to curse at because it was her fault that her grandson smothered to death. And then later because her son got killed by the Germans. That made me a widow and now I got to dress like one or she says she'll have me arrested for—for—consorting with men, she calls it."

Her laugh shrilled out a high, derisive note. "Men? What man'd even want to look at me the way I'm all got up like I was a corpse myself?"

"You—you got to keep living here with her, Ruth-Rachel?" he asked.

She shook her head helplessly. "I got nowhere else to go, Luther. Dale's government insurance was made out to her, too, thinking she'd use it to take care of me and the baby if anything happened to him. He did it that way because he didn't think I could take care of the money as good as she could. Ten thousand dollars that should have been my money he left her, and she won't let me see a cent

of it. As if she needed it with what she's got hidden away. I've got to eat what she gives me, live here, wear mourning all the time. If I go anywhere, she's right behind me. After the baby died, I went in town to the Golden Palace to get my old job back, and the next day she was marching up and down in front of the place wearing a sign saying I was unfaithful to her son while he was away fighting for me. Gus had to let me go." She sighed. "If I could get away from here, Luther. If only I could get away from her."

"Where to, Ruth-Rachel? Where would you like to go?"

"I don't know. All I know is I got to get out of these black rags and put on some lipstick and look and act as though I'm alive and not living with the dead. I might as well be dead myself to live like this. I'm only twenty-four years old. The same as you are, Luther."

He sat silently, contemplating her problem. "Let me get some things done first, Ruth-Rachel," he said. "This—this is—crazy. It can't keep going on like this. I'll talk to her. Maybe I can make her see—"

"Oh, Luther! Would you?" She brightened, throwing herself at him, clutching at him in gratitude.

"Sure. Sure, I will. Real soon." He stood up and she stood with him, close to him, unwilling to let him go. "I'm so glad you're back, Luther," she said. "I know she'll listen to you if you talk to her."

"I can't promise anything, but I'll try. I can promise that much."

"Thank you, Luther. You don't know how much it will mean to me." There was a moment of silence, then, "Luther?"

"What?"

She was clinging to his arm and he was aware of her closeness, the feline softness of her touch, the conscious alertness she generated in him.

"Did you—were you—really there—when—?"

"You mean when Dale was—?" He nodded, looking away from her. "It happened at night in the dark forest. I saw him after he got—" He shrugged helplessly.

"Did he—say—anything—at all? Could he talk?"

"No. No, Ruth-Rachel, he didn't. He couldn't. He was—dead."

She leaned her head against his left sleeve, partly on his chest, and he looked down at the top of her blonde head, remembering this gay, chattering, happy girl in school, seeing her so mature and grown-up at a school picnic, then swimming in the Welcome River, her beautifully and prematurely adult body pushing and straining at the material of her figure-tight bathing suit with young, firm, high breasts already full and shapely.

"Listen to me, Ruth-Rachel," he said with a sudden rush of words. "You still got time tonight with the stores open late. I want you to go into town and get you a dress or two that're fit and decent to wear. Get your hair fixed up and some color in your lips. Don't you care what Lutie says or does. Dale Hagen didn't marry or die for no field scarecrow. He couldn't come back, but the way he talked about you all the time, he sure wouldn't of wanted you to be buried because he was." He tore at the back pocket of his trousers, pulled out a wallet, opened it, and took out several bills. "Here," he said. "Here's a hundred dollars. Now you go do like I told you."

She looked up, overwhelmed and brightened with gratitude at his generosity. "Oh, Luther, you think I ought to do it?"

"Shuh! Pretty girl like you? Sure you ought to do it. You can't go on living like a ragbag just because a man was killed. If all the widows did the same all over, the whole country would be— Never mind. You go along. Stores'll be open till nine-thirty, so you got plenty of time yet."

"Oh, Luther, I want to so bad. I want to get out of here and get a job and start living again. I've even been thinking I could maybe go to night school and take one of those business courses. I could do it. Then I could go to work in an office. I know I could do it if I had the money to pay for it."

"Okay, Ruth-Rachel. You get this done first and then later we'll talk about getting you a job somewheres in town so you can go to school at night this fall. Maybe I'll talk to Mr. Radford about you myself. Maybe you can clerk in one of the county offices."

"Oh, Luther, will you really?" She reached up on her toes and put her arms around his neck and he felt the warmth of her body and full breasts pressed tightly against him. She pulled his head down and his mouth was upon hers as she kissed him hard. When she released him, he caught his breath momentarily and moved back a step. "All right, honey, we'll see," he said. "Now I got to go, but I'll look in on you and Lutie real soon."

"Thank you, Luther," she said. "I know your coming home is going to help me a lot." Her face lit up in a bright smile. "You won't be sorry," she added.

He could see the natural beauty in her, the loveliness that lay beneath these ill-fitting mourning garments. As he turned away, he consoled himself with the thought that he was doing this for the widow of his late comrade in arms; but the thought was not a very convincing one, and he knew this, too.

It was nearing nine-thirty that Saturday night and the celebration in Robbie Tilebin's honor had been going on in Buckeytown since early evening, beginning with the Come-One-Come-All Barbecue Supper, followed by some dancing and general imbibing. Now in the large building that was the community social hall tonight (and would become the community church tomorrow morning), the benches were filled. The sides of the huge, open room were lined with male and female standees, crowded together, moving restlessly, the occasional slap of a hand against a bare shoulder or female buttock, a sharp giggle or a small scream, all causing good-humored guffaws and hearty chuckles from those seated nearby. Heads filled every window, poking in from the outside for a better look. The wide double-door entrance had been flung open to give the overflow crowd a chance to hear some of the commendatory speeches that followed one behind the other.

Outside, at a slight distance from the hall, two men stood guard over the barrel of white lightning, refusing to permit more than "one-apiece" samplings until it could be shared equally by all. A long platform of wide boards had been nailed and cleated together on the ground, its surface sprinkled with a wax powder to make dancing easier. Barefooted girls and boys were already shuffling in the dirt within hearing of Mose Maxie's eight-piece Jazz Concert Band.

Inside the building the Buckeytowners listened and approved what they heard, stomping their feet on the floor, applauding, slapping rolled newspapers against their open hands. The indoor warmth and body odors had blended into a heavy, oppressive human stench, and now the straw fans, hats, and newspapers appeared, to wave small whispers of relief to the sweating occupants.

Robbie Tilebin, artificial limb outstretched before him, a stout cane in each hand, sat on the stage in the chair of honor, Lida-Mae beside him in a smaller chair. As he listened to the high-pitched voice of the Right Reverend Drummond Haig, known as God's Own Deacon, watched as the small, thin man stood on a whiskey case before the lectern that had been built years ago to accommodate old Mordecai Buckey's heft and height without this accessory, he felt a deep sadness over the old man's death that had occurred in 1943, and of which he had been totally unaware until just before his return home. Next to Haig's momentarily vacant chair sat Droody

Hawkins, who operated the Hawkins Insurance Company and Burying Society, was the only undertaker in the Negro community and one of its wealthier citizens. Beside Hawkins, in a set of brilliant white robes trimmed with gold and red, sat Joshua Treefill, who was Buckeytown's unofficial "mayor," a man who had perhaps been closer to old Mordecai than any other and had been chosen by the "syndicate" to take over operation of the four Swamp stills after the old man's sudden death.

Now Haig spoke of The Man of the Hour, Robbie Tilebin, grandson of the great and honored man whose name had been given to this community, "who, without fear in his heart or soul or body, with the courage of ten men and the vision of God before him, set out through a hail of enemy cannon shell and led his men into battle and to a well-deserved victory; and in so doing—"

Into Lida-Mae's ear Robbie whispered, "Man, is he off base by about seventeen miles! Shuh! There wasn't any cannon shells and nobody was firing so much as a bullet when I moved up. One grenade that I threw back was all. The reason I moved up was *because* it was so quiet. If it'd been like he's saying, I'd still be buried deep down in my little old foxhole, and you can bet your good money on that!"

"Sh-h-h!" Lida-Mae whispered in return. "Let him have his fun." Then, "Robbie, look."

"What?"

"Your white friend, that Sergeant Dorman who stopped you to talk in town today."

"Where? I don't see him."

"He's outside the main door. I saw him look in just a second ago."

"I'll go get him, bring him up here on the platform. He's the man they ought to be talking about 'stead of me."

"You sit still. I'll go. It'll be easier and better that way."

She slipped around behind the chairs to the rear doorway and went outside. Even in this gay, jostling, happy, and expectant crowd, a white man was not very hard to find. She came up quietly behind him where he stood looking on at the as yet musicless, impromptu dancing going on among the youngsters.

"Mr. Dorman?"

He swung around to face her. "Ye—oh, hello, Lida-Mae. Was that Robbie I saw up on the platform? Hard to see through all the smoke in there."

"That was Robbie. Would you like to come inside?"

Luther shook his head and smiled. "I think it would be better if I waited out here until it's over and he can come out. It sure is a turnout. You ought to be real proud of Robbie."

"I am. Robbie is a good man. The best there is."

"I'll buy that. I guess he's told you how we used to fish and hunt together before the war. He showed me a lot of tricks old Mordecai taught him."

"I—" The small smile disappeared suddenly from her face and she froze into silence. Her head was averted now, her eyes over Luther's left shoulder, a sudden vacant stillness in them. Warned thus, Luther turned quickly and saw the grinning evil of Hessie Loomis's face approaching, his right jaw lumpy with chewing tobacco, a two-day growth of beard on his face, hat moved back in an upward tilt so that the wide brim of it added height to him. His thumbs were hooked into his cartridge-filled gunbelt as though calling particular attention to his armed state. He stopped now and spat a brown stream to one side, eyes still on Lida-Mae, speaking to Luther. "Looks like it's a mighty big night for heroes, don't it?" he said casually. "Two in one place at the same time." He looked toward the community hall. "Your turn next, hero?" he asked.

"I think I'd better go inside," Lida-Mae said, turning to go. "I'll tell Robbie you're out here, Sergeant Dorman."

"Thanks, Lida-Mae. Tell him there's no rush. I'll be here when it's over."

"Tell him I'm out here, too, Lida-Mae," Loomis said as she walked past him quickly and headed in the direction of the large building. She neither looked around nor answered. Loomis turned back to Luther when she had passed from his view, looking him up and down, his eyes coming to final rest on the blue-ribboned bar. "How come you goin' to a nigger hoedown, boy?" he asked.

Luther flushed angrily. "It against any law for me to come over here, Mr. Deputy?" he asked, trying to pack as much insolence into his tone as possible.

Loomis stared coldly at him, the grin fading slowly from his face. "Seems like I could dig one up was I of a mind to, boy," he replied.

"Then you go right ahead and start diggin'," Luther said, his voice holding the just-right amount of allowable contempt.

"Cohabitin' with a colored gal, now, that could make a right smart mess of trouble for a white boy, hero or no."

"I guess you'd know about that a whole lot better'n most anybody else, wouldn't you, Deputy?"

Loomis's head nodded quickly up and down, his jaws chewing slowly on the wad of tobacco in his cheek. He spat again, this time with deadly accuracy, barely reaching the edge of Luther's polished shoe. Luther stood his ground without moving. "Old Man Radford let you off'n the leash for tonight?" Loomis asked with a sneering grin, his anger well contained behind it.

"About the same way Old Man Bartly let you off his," Luther returned.

Loomis studied Luther's face carefully, then said coolly, "You know, boy, I heard a lot of fancy speeches from a lot of people yesterday and last night, all about what a great big hero you are, what with that medal the President hisself given you personal, an' your name an' pictures in all the newspapers an' magazines an' newsreels. Almost all them same things they're sayin' in there to that nigger."

"Anything they're saying about him in there, Deputy, he earned it, and don't you forget it for a minute. He didn't get his Bronze Star for pushing people around who were unarmed. He went up against the biggest and best of 'em and come out of it alive. Beat up, but alive."

"Well, now, maybe he did just that. And maybe you earned yourn, too. But one a these days, maybe both'n of you'll get a chance to prove it. I just don't happen to think neither one a you's got half the guts you gettin' all the credit for havin'."

Luther's eyes narrowed. "Now that might just happen, Mr. Deputy, but I never picked a fight in my whole life before, and I ain't picking one now. When and if the time comes, well, that'll be another thing."

Loomis spat again and laughed aloud for the benefit of the small ring of curious Negroes who had gathered nearby to witness the unusual sight of two white men so close to a colored celebration, cautious of Loomis, fearing for Luther, recognizing instantly that there was a river of bad blood flowing between the two. Loomis said, "That time'll come for sure, hero. It'll come, and you won't have to worry none about pickin' it. It'll be picked for you."

They stood for a moment, hearing the muffled words of God's Own Deacon, realizing that through the silence they were hearing a prayer for Robbie's quick and full recovery and his permanent return to Buckeytown. The entire assembly had risen, and Deacon Haig stood with hands extended outward and upward over them, eyes closed, uttering the benediction. Then there was the slowly rising roar of scraping feet and happy voices of men and women

as they began clearing the floor of the chairs and benches for those who wanted to do their eating, drinking, and dancing indoors. Others began to surge out into the open to queue up at the barrel of white lightning and wet their overdry throats. Lida-Mae remained behind to work with the women. Robbie came outside, leaning on his canes, breaking away from the group that surrounded him to go to Luther.

Seeing Luther with another white man, he greeted him more formally with, "Hidy, Sergeant Dorman. Real nice to see you." He turned and recognized Loomis, who was staring at him intently, contemptuously, and Robbie's smile faded. "Uh—hello, Mister Loomis, sir." One hand, still clutching a cane, went instinctively upward in an unconscious move of salute, then suddenly dropped back to his side.

Loomis said, "Just passin' the time a night with your hero friend here." He nodded toward Luther, eyes still on Robbie. "Listen, boy," he continued, "you're the big man here tonight so I'm just goin' a tell you. You pass the word for everybody to keep things quiet over here tonight. I hear of any ruckusin' or if I get called out to come over here to break up a fight or a cuttin', somebody's sure goin' a pay for it."

Robbie said, "There won't be any trouble tonight, Mr. Loomis. At least, nothing serious. Nobody's going to break any laws."

"All right. Just so's you remember that." Loomis turned abruptly and stalked away to his official car without another word or a look backward to Luther. The Negroes, standing quietly at the scene, made a wide path for him.

"He's a mean one, that Loomis," Luther said.

"He just hates things and people, that's his only trouble," Robbie said. "We've seen him operate around here. He even kicks our dogs out of his way because they're niggers' dogs."

"A real, mean bastard," Luther added to his earlier statement.

Robbie laughed grimly. "Man, he sure is. You know, there's a few just like him laying in a couple of holes in Italy, taken care of by their own. Some night Mr. Hessie Loomis is going to find out that other people been learning how to use guns these past few years and don't have to be afraid of 'em now that they know how to put 'em to work. Ain't a man coming back these days that ain't bringing his own carbine or a .45 or a Beretta hand gun, and maybe even a few live grenades."

"I guess you're right, Robbie, but let me tell you this. Anybody's got 'em better hide 'em in a good, safe place because that's all a

mean son-of-a-bitch like Loomis'd need to come over here and go kill-crazy."

"Don't you worry about that, Luther. We learned a lot in Italy about a lot of things. There are still plenty of men up in those Eyetie hills living with their Eyetalian gals, who ain't never coming home again. They found out what they were fighting for and they know it ain't here in Regis County or anywhere else in the South. Not even in the North. The married ones with families, most of them come back. Me, when I get better, I'm going to take Lida-Mae and the two children and go live in Italy on my pension. I can make out better over there than I can here without the likes of Deputy Hessie Loomis to come stomping all over my life."

Luther said nothing, stood waiting for Robbie's low-grade anger to subside. When it did, Robbie said, "I got a fresh bottle in my cabin, Luther, ain't never been opened before. Real good bourbon I brought back from Washington with me. How about you and me and Lida-Mae have us a good luck drink together?"

"Sure, Robbie. I'll be glad to."

Robbie signaled to Lida-Mae and the three went to Luther's car for the short ride to the Tilebin cottage, calling to the others that they would be back within the hour. At the cottage Robbie and Luther sat on the top step of the porch while Lida-Mae got the bottle and two glasses for the men, then went inside to check on the children. Through the open door Luther could see the ill-furnished front room, the rough, bare floor, the old iron, wood-burning stove, and through the inner door, the single bedroom that Robbie and his wife shared with their son and daughter with a minimum of privacy. There was neither gas nor electricity in the cottage and water was pumped by hand at the kitchen sink. There were no bathroom or toilet facilities in the house. And yet, by Buckeytown standards, this was far more than most could claim. Luther could see that even here, among those who had left this community to serve in the Army, things would never be the same again. Dissatisfaction and sullen resentment had already begun to set in, would grow increasingly as Negro soldiers returned to compare their lot with what they had seen elsewhere, discuss their restlessness and angry feelings between themselves. And then, Luther thought, all it will need is one tiny spark to set off one hell of a fire and explosion. A Hessie Loomis could furnish the spark.

Luther had his drink, gripped Robbie's shoulder, and said good night to Lida-Mae.

"When are you going back to Walter Reed?" he asked Robbie.

"Tomorrow afternoon train. I've been home almost thirty days now. That's why the party was held tonight."

"I've got to get along now, Robbie. You take care of yourself up there and come back soon." He motioned toward Lida-Mae. "You got a lot to come back to."

Robbie laughed softly with appreciation, looked at Lida-Mae, who got up promptly and went inside the cottage, accepting the tribute of both men with a shy smile. "I'll walk you to your car," Robbie said rising, taking up the two canes. "I'll be right back," he called toward the house.

They walked the short distance to the street in silence, a renewed and silent camaraderie between them, Negro and white man, the feeling stronger between them now perhaps because of the very special ribbons that were pinned to their shirts, almost as though these pieces of multicolored material equalized the differences that stood between them. When they reached the parked car, Robbie said, "I wonder if I could count on you for a favor, Luther? A mighty big one."

"Sure, Robbie, if I can."

"I know it's asking a lot of a white man."

With some embarrassment Luther said, "That don't make any difference to me, Robbie. I said I'd do it if I can, didn't I? What is it?"

"Loomis."

"Hessie Loomis?"

"Hessie Loomis. He's got an eye for Lida-Mae."

Slowly and with rising anger, "Lida-Mae tell you that?"

"No. No, she wouldn't tell me a thing like that. But others did. It's no fault of hers, Luther. She is a good girl and a fine woman and mother. She knows if she don't—well, go his way, he'd take it out on the two children or maybe even her folks." Robbie stopped for a moment, finding it difficult to go on. His face grew hard and grim, as though the blood had been drained out of him, and his despair was reflected in his next words. "He's had her—a few—times—" Luther looked at him quickly, saw the terrible anguish and misery in the man—"but as long as he had to force her, I can't hold it against her. I'll look after her when I get back for good, get her and the children out of here; but meanwhile—in the meantime—I'd like to tell her if she needs somebody to help her with anything, to get in touch with you. If you say it's all right for me to tell her that."

Luther kicked his shoe angrily into the dirt, scattering the top

dust, spinning himself almost off balance. He turned back to Robbie, tried to swallow the lump that had come into his throat, said huskily, "You tell her it's all right to call me, Robbie. She does, I'll see what I can do. It'll be all right. Don't—don't you worry about it. You better go back to her now. And take care of that leg and come back soon, you hear."

Robbie smiled faintly. "I hear you, Luther, and I'll be back soon's they let me go. And thanks. Thanks a lot, Luther. I'll tell her."

5.

It was nearing eleven when he left Robbie, and as he drove slowly toward town he thought again of Robbie's smoldering words, "He's had her a few times," the bitterness of his feelings in this knowledge, in the simple admission to a white man that his wife had been "taken" by the evil, brutal Hessie Loomis. He wondered how it must be with Lida-Mae, holding onto the erroneous belief that Robbie did not know about Loomis and her, withholding it from him in the hope of saving her husband from some act of desperation that could easily spell his end.

Perhaps before the war, Luther thought, he wouldn't have bothered for a moment over a white man's right to a Negro's wife or daughter, no more than he considered it wrong for himself to have gone off with Cressie Jackson so many times. But then, he placated himself, this wasn't the same. Cressie had been a willing, even eager, partner. And, perhaps, it was the fact that Luther had been four years younger then than his present twenty-four years; and with a war added, with close association with many men from different parts of the country, he had been left with a new belief that all human beings were entitled to human rights and dignities regardless of color or station. And even though he was fully aware that he possessed his Medal of Honor fraudulently, he knew that the one Robbie wore, the Bronze Star, had been won honorably and at great cost; that Robbie Tilebin was his friend; that he and his family were entitled to those human rights and dignities.

Ruth-Rachel came burrowing through these thoughts and he recalled her last words whispered to him earlier in the evening, "You won't be sorry, Luther." He was tempted to drive past Lutie's house to see if she might still be in the swing on the porch, seeking relief from the heat of the night, dressed in the new clothes he had urged her to buy. As he passed the turnoff to the Hagen cottage, he decided against it.

Tomorrow, he thought, maybe tomorrow.

In her room Ruth-Rachel lay on her bed, almost in a sitting position so that her hair, so recently set by Miss Beulah's expert hands, would not become mussed. She thought of her purchases in town, made with the money Luther had given her, the first she had had her hands on in months.

Four of those months had passed since the news of Dale's death had come, and Ruth-Rachel, now in deadly fear of Lutie, who, she felt, was completely insane with her increased drinking and preaching, had been careful not to offend her mother-in-law, taking the greatest pains to avoid her whenever possible. Orphaned at an early age, having no known relatives, she had worked as a servant in several farmhouses, losing each of her jobs as she developed into a possible threat to her employers when their husbands or sons began taking too much notice of her.

Her job at the Golden Palace, then, was a godsend, since this problem did not exist; in fact, it was Ruth-Rachel's presence that attracted an additional clientele for which Gus, her employer, was grateful. And it was here that she had met Dale, who had hungered and yearned for her with an overwhelming fierceness. Quick to seize an opportunity, Ruth-Rachel had played her hand with caution, permitting him only the most minor of intimacies until, fired by a passionate need for her, he had proposed marriage, despite the fact that he had known all along that Lutie would hardly become reconciled to a situation that meant sharing him with someone else.

On Wednesday, October 15, 1941, Dale left a note for Lutie saying he was driving down to New Orleans with a friend for the balance of the week. Naturally, he omitted the name of the friend, or that the friend was a female. On Saturday of that same week, after having had blood tests taken, a license applied for, and waiting for the necessary seventy-two hours to elapse, they were married. On Monday afternoon they returned to Regis.

Lutie Hagen stormed and raged and cried out to Heaven and the Lord to save her son from this wanton, this *nothing*, this piece of tawdry white trash, but Dale was completely and fully immersed in love, discovering from Ruth-Rachel those subtle arts she had picked up, practiced expertly, and was now using to keep him to herself. When Lutie threatened to cut him out of her will, Dale countered with the threat to move away and never return. Besides, his job with Tam Nariocas was paying him a wage that gave him a feeling of independence. Eventually, they moved into a small place of their own, but when the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor, and on the following morning when Dale received his Greetings from the President of the

United States, he prevailed on Ruth-Rachel to move in with Lutie on a temporary basis, until he could send her money from his Army pay with which to rent an apartment or at least a room, somewhere. Much against her better judgment, Ruth-Rachel moved back to the Hagen cottage, pleasantly surprised that Lutie had become, for the moment, more receptive to her.

And now, with the return of Luther Dorman to Regis, she saw a promise in the future. A promise of release. Luther Dorman. A big man in town—everywhere in the country—right now. The biggest. And he had already promised he would do what he could. At least, she knew Lutie would listen to him, so anxious was she for any word of Dale, perhaps some last words he might have spoken for her.

No, she repeated softly to herself, *you won't be one bit sorry, Luther. Not one bit. I promise you that!*"

6.

Sunday morning.

Luther woke to the tolling of bells, and for a moment he remembered the first church bells he had heard in a liberated town in France. The heat of the sun had already penetrated the walls, and he could feel it as though a heavy weight rested upon him. He got up and sat on the edge of the bed while he smoked a cigarette, then stripped off his pajamas to shave and shower, thinking once again over the events of the night before.

Dressed, he went directly to the car and drove quickly to the Dorman place, to see Carrie first; then it was his intention to drive to Radford Hall in the hope of seeing Miss Bethann and Harriet, if only for a quick glance.

Carrie was in the kitchen fixing breakfast when he pulled up, and she began to set another place for him, happy to see him after his abrupt departure the day before, hoping he was over his restless, reckless mood.

"Where's Pa?" he asked.

"He won't be up for some time. Besides, he never eats in the morning. It makes him sick. Sit down, Luther, and eat with me. The sausage and fried cakes are most done and all I have to do is put a few more eggs on. Pour the coffee, will you?"

He shook his head grimly as he poured the two cups of coffee for them. "Pa," he said. "Jud Dorman. The only way I ever remembered him was when he was drunk and looking for somebody else to do his work. You out in the fields first, then me. Never him."

"It wasn't always that way, Luther. If it was, I couldn't stand him,

either. You don't remember him before he had his accident, but I do, and that's what makes the difference in how we feel about him and how much each of us is willing to put up with. He was always a hard-working man up to the time when he had his accident. He was one of the best carpenters and cabinetmakers in the county. He did a lot of work up at the Hall and—"

"I know. He was telling me about it. I thought he was lying."

Carrie shook her head. "He wasn't lying about that."

Luther nodded in vague agreement. "You going to miss Army life, Luther?" she asked.

He smiled up at her. "Some, I guess. Not the life as much as the people. Guys like Joe Galliano, Phil Rupertus, a Greek name of Karylios, Bender, Trippe." He caught himself then, wondering why only the names of the dead men came to him. "There were a lot of good Joes who came from all over the country, from families they were proud of, always showing pictures of their fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers and girl friends. People like that captain you met here, the one from Washington. Joel Harris. Like Harry Bledso from Chancellor."

"He was nice. I liked him a lot."

"Sure. Like this girl I met in England. A nurse. She flew back to the States with us—"

"I know. I saw her picture in the papers and magazines, standing next to you when the President gave you the medal. Lieutenant Holliday."

"Holliman. Claudia Holliman. From Boston. A nice Boston family."

"You still hear from her, Luther?"

"No. No more. She got married the weekend we got back to Washington. To a doctor."

"Oh." She caught the softness in his voice, knew that this had been something special in his life. "You want some more coffee?" she asked suddenly.

"I'll take a little more," he said. Carrie got up and went to the stove. "Hey, that fellow Archer you were dancing with. I thought he was married—"

Her back to him as she poured the coffee, she replied, "He was. To Eunice Lang. They had two little girls. Then Eunice died back in '44. Polio. I've seen him once or twice since then, just for a few minutes at a time. Until he came up and asked me to dance with him at the banquet the other night."

"He still working—?"

"He's been working for Frank Beal in his hardware store in town."

"You think he still—might—?"

"Be interested in me?" She laughed mirthlessly. "I don't know why he should, particularly with Pa still around to threaten to shoot him."

Luther let the subject lapse, noting Carrie's unwillingness to prolong the discussion. He got up and went to the sink, took a glass of water, let the remaining drops fall on the tip of his cigarette to put it out. He came back to the table and sat down again, lit another cigarette.

"Carrie, what would you say if I told you I was thinking about getting married?"

"You, Luther?" she replied in surprise at the suddenness of the question.

"Me," he replied with the faint trace of a grin.

"To who, Luther? You— Oh, Luther, you don't mean—to—?"

He had leaned back in the chair, the cigarette cocked at a jaunty angle in his mouth. "Miss Bethann," he said.

"Her?" Carrie's voice showed true shock now. "*Her?*"

"Why *not* her?"

"Luther, I—I—just don't—don't know—" She fumbled with the words helplessly.

"Listen, Carrie. I told you who was the father of Miss Bethann's little girl. Me. Now I'm going up there this morning to see her and my daughter. We're going to talk this thing over, and I intend to tell her that I'm going to talk with Mr. Marcus and tell him who the baby's pa is. When I do, then I guess we'll start talking about me and her getting married."

Carrie came to the corner of the table where he sat, holding onto an edge of it to steady herself. "Luther, don't do that," she pleaded earnestly. "Please don't do it."

"Why not? You think just because she and I—because we—did what we did, she ain't fitten to be my wife? Look here, Carrie, she's a good woman and I'll make her a good husband and a father for the little one. One thing for damned sure, once I marry her—" his voice faded off; the very thought of marriage with Bethann Radford had stimulated him so that he could scarcely talk— "once I marry her, Carrie, you and me, we won't ever have to worry none about anything again. I get to be Marcus's son-in-law—" again the thought silenced him momentarily— "I'll be sitting up on top of the world. Radford Hall, the bank, everything. He's got no son to leave it to. It'll be for Miss Bethann and me and Harriet. And you, too."

She began to weep openly now. "Oh, Luther, Luther, you—you've got it all wrong. You've got it all so wrong about Miss Bethann and Mr. Marcus. And everything else. Everything."

"No, Carrie," Luther said firmly. "I'm not wrong about this. You wait and see. The way old Marcus was talking to Harry Bledso and me, you'd a thought I was his son-in-law already. Hell, for all I know, she might've already told him about me being father to the young one, and all he's waiting for is the right time to talk to me about it." He got up and put the cap on. "I'm going up there now, Carrie. I'll be back."

7.

Luther drove through the gateway into Radford Hall and pulled the car around back to the garage. He got out and walked up to the kitchen door just as Newton opened it from the inside, grinning a toothy welcome to him.

"Come in, Mist' Luther. Sho glad to see you home again. I been tellin' Sudie how good you look when you come out a that there station an' got in the limousine. An' all the fuss they makin' over you in town. I sho tell her. Miss Bethann, too."

"Hello, Newton. Nice to see you again, too." He looked beyond the old Negro to where Sudie stood, a red-gummed toothless grin on her face. "Hello, Sudie," Luther called to her. "You feelin' all right?"

"Ah guess z'well'z d'good Lawd'll let a sinnin' nigguh feel, Mist' Luthuh. Mist' Marcus, he done come down an' had some coffee an' gone back up to sleep. You want fo' Newton to wake him up fo' you?"

"No, no, Sudie. But I'd like to see Miss Bethann if she's awake." When Sudie looked at him questioningly, he added, "I've seen just about everybody else but her."

"Sho," Sudie replied. "She awake. Just about got li'l Harriet fed. Newton, you go on up an' fetch Miss Bethann. Tell her th' big man of Regis, he done come callin' on her."

Luther followed the chuckling Sudie into the big kitchen and stood at the table, refused a cup of coffee, waited in silence for Newton's return. The old man came in quietly and said, "Mist' Luther, if'n you go in Mist' Marcus's study, she be down in jus' a minute."

Luther followed Newton into the study and Newton closed the door, leaving him there alone. He began to feel some anxiety now, an apprehension he had not felt as he had spoken confidently of his

intentions to Carrie. Now that he was here, a feeling of awkward helplessness overpowered him, tore at his throat with dryness, seeming to strangle with the intake and exhalation of each breath. He tried to think of the hundreds of times he had whispered touching, tender messages of love to Bethann, had spoken to her as though she had been there beside him so many nights, so long ago, with words that had leaped glibly from mind to lips while she was thousands of miles away; and now, here in her home, not one of those multi-thousands of words could he recall.

He stared at the desk, Marcus's desk, remembering his father's words speaking with pride, telling him that Jud Dorman's own hands had built this desk. Luther began to examine it, thinking that if Jud had built this piece of furniture, then he had indeed once been a master at the art of cabinetmaking. He turned to examine the fireplace, the intricately carved mantel and fluted pilasters that supported it, marveling that this could be the work of those drunken, gnarled, fumbling hands. He stared at the shelves of books, many bound in Marcus Radford's special tan leather binding, perhaps 2000 or 3000 or more books along these four walls, more than he had ever seen in his lifetime in one room. He felt the glovelike leather of the side chair next to the desk, the large swivel chair behind it, the tall lamps, the softness of the rich oriental rug beneath his feet. Everything here was as it should be: rich, plush, eloquently opulent, the home of a very wealthy and important man. He fingered the cloisonné vase on the table behind the desk, put it down when he heard the door open. He turned around, saw Bethann. Except that somehow she seemed taller, more mature and beautiful, it was as though the curtain of the four years between them had been pulled aside. His eyes swarmed over her appreciatively as she stood returning his stare soberly. His mouth was dry and his tongue flicked out to wet his lips nervously, waiting for her to speak.

"Hello, Luther," she said, and this too, he knew, was different. Her voice had changed and was richer and fuller than he had known it. She came forward and extended a hand, and he moved to take it. "How nice that you came back well and sound. I'm sorry I couldn't be at the station or the banquet—" Her voice trailed off emptily, as if all she had to say to him had been said.

"I—know," Luther replied. "They told me you were busy—taking care of your—daughter—and couldn't leave her."

"Anyway, I'm glad to see you home again. I know it will make Carrie happy."

He was still staring at her, wondering how to start, how to get

into the subject. The silence between them grew awkward and he saw her hands twisting her tiny handkerchief with restlessness. She glanced behind her toward the door as if she were getting ready to walk away and leave him here alone. "Miss Bethann," he said finally, "I—I—got to—talk to you."

"To me? About what?" She would not make it easy for him, he saw.

"It's about—about— Miss Bethann, I know that you—well, Carrie wrote me while I was in the Army that you—you—"

Her patience evaporated. "What is it, Luther? Why don't you come to the point?"

"Well, it's just not that easy to say right out, Miss Bethann. It's about—well, about—Miss Harriet." It was out now.

"Harriet?" Bethann's voice took a sharp upnote of surprise. "*Harriet?*" she repeated. "Whatever in the world are you talking about, Luther? How could anything you have to say to me concern my daughter?"

He blushed, again feeling the earlier inadequacy and awkwardness attacking him. He became angry. She knew damned well what he was talking about, but made no effort to make things easier for him. He could feel her gaze on him, holding him pinned fiercely as though the fire in her eyes was burning into his flesh. "Miss Bethann," he blurted out, "you're not going to deny me my own daughter, are you? I know I did wrong to run off like I did, but I was scared. And I didn't have any idea it would—take."

Bethann sank down into the leather chair behind her, hands gripped tightly in her lap. She stared at him hollowly as the meaning of his words suddenly became clear to her. "Luther, you don't make sense," she said in a low, tight voice. "Not any sense at all. What are you talking about? Do you by any chance believe that *you* are the father of my daughter Harriet?"

"You telling me I'm *not*?" Luther said more boldly now that he was sure they had reached the same level of understanding.

Exasperated, as though she were talking to a small, unintelligent child, she said, "Of *course* not! What an idiotic thing for you to say or think! Harriet's father— Oh, Luther! That night—in the woods—you mean. I'd forgotten about it."

"Then I guess I took it more serious than you did, Miss Bethann," Luther said with a more positive anger. "If I wasn't the one, then maybe you'd be nice enough to tell me just who is her father. And maybe at the same time, why you and he ain't—aren't married."

"That, Luther, is none of your business!" she exclaimed with annoyance.

"Well, now, I just happen to think it is my business. If I'm her father, then it sure is my business. A lot of my business! And when I tell Mr. Marcus about it—"

She felt herself caught up in a trap. "You'll do nothing of the kind, do you hear me, Luther!" she said sharply.

Luther looked down on her coldly. "Listen, Miss Bethann, you and I know what happened that night in the cabin. You and I know the real truth and, by sure God, you ain't going to stand there and treat me like no little nigger boy with a runny nose that needs to be wiped. Right now, anything I say makes news—important news all over the country. And if I go to the newspapers and tell them about you and me and our daughter, that you're trying to keep her away from her father, all hell's going to break loose and you know it!"

"Luther, I swear to you that you—you're not—Harriet's father. You wouldn't be foolish enough to go to the papers with a thing like this. Would you want that kind of publicity for yourself?"

"I can stand it a whole lot better than you can, Miss Bethann. The wrong is going to be with you, not me."

"But, Luther, you wouldn't do an innocent child a lifetime of harm for no good reason at all, would you? That night in the woods was a blind, foolish, unintentional accident and you know it. I'm not blaming you for—what happened—not any more than I can excuse myself for having let it happen. It—well, it just happened, a sudden chemical reaction. That's all it was and you can't make any more out of it. You simply can't!"

Luther said calmly, "Well, I don't know anything about your kind of chemistry, or any other kind, but if that's the only way I can get to my own daughter, then, by God, that's the way I'll have to do it."

"Luther," she pleaded earnestly, "please listen to me. You're wrong, I tell you. So wrong."

"Look, Miss Bethann," he said, "I know I'm a long way from being your social or money equal or up to what you might call your intellectual and cultural levels and standards, but you're not going to talk down to me. Not for one minute. Particularly when I'm daddy to your daughter, you're not."

"Luther, I tell you you're *not* her father! Can't I make you see that?"

"No, you can't, because if what you're saying is the God's truth,

then all you're telling me is that you're a common tramp, sleeping out with me and others, too. But I'm not about to believe that and just step out of your way that easy. What's more, I can go into a court of law and have me declared her legal daddy, and I'll by God take her away from you as an unfit mother. You just remember, I'll have every newspaper in the country on my side and the sympathy of every citizen in this whole state. I'm not fooling you one bit, Miss Bethann. I'm willing to marry you and make the whole thing legal so's nobody can come pointing a finger at my daughter later on and call her what she'll be if you don't pay some attention to what I'm telling you. You just think it over, Miss Bethann. I got to go now, but I'm going to see your daddy in his office tomorrow morning like he asked me to. He's invited me to have dinner here tomorrow night. And if you got any ideas you might pack up and run off with Harriet, you better think twice or more on it. Soon as you do, you'll be admitting that what I'm saying is the truth, and I'll swear out a warrant for you and have every sheriff and policeman in the whole country looking for the pair of you!"

She stood up, one hand at her throat, unable to speak; she could only stare at him, into his angry eyes as he hurled the final threat at her, then turned and walked to the door before he spoke again.

"You just remember what I told you, Miss Bethann," he said, calmly and with an air of finality. "By tomorrow, your daddy's going to know all about it, so you better make up your mind quick."

Marcus Radford had gone back to sleep and now it was early afternoon. He came downstairs and had a combined breakfast and lunch of fried fish, eggs, sausage, corn muffins, jam, and coffee. He picked up the unread part of the *Sunday Herald*, the *Chancellor Examiner*, and the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, went into his study and lighted a fresh cigar, prepared to spend several hours catching up with the local, state, national, and international news. He had been so engaged for no more than an hour when there was a light tap on the door.

"Come in," he called without looking up.

He heard the door open, but heard no footsteps approaching him, and then he looked up over the lowered top edge of the newspaper and saw it was Bethann who stood in the doorway. His eyes narrowed quickly in surprise, and then slowly he put the paper down in his lap. This was the first time since the affair with Garrett Harwick that she had voluntarily sought him out, had shown any in-

dication that she wanted to speak with him; that, for the matter, she was even more than barely aware of his existence. Marcus started to get to his feet, but she closed the door behind her and walked to the chair that was closest to him. Marcus sat back, moved the papers so that they fell to the floor, waited for her to speak. She sat in the chair seemingly unable to begin the conversation, and so it was that Marcus, seeing the struggle within her, spoke first

"You—want to see me, Bethann?" he said.

It was hard for her to get the first words out of her mouth, to speak without anger to the man upon whom she had placed all the blame for her years of sadness and heavy grief.

"Some—something has—come up. I—I've got—to talk to you about it," she said hesitantly, looking at the tips of his slippers rather than into his face.

"What is it about?" he asked.

"It's about—about—this—this man—"

"What man?"

"Your—" the words burst out of her mouth explosively—"your *hero!* Luther Dorman!"

Marcus Radford's brows furrowed up in surprise. "Luther Dorman?" he asked. "What in heaven's name can you possibly have to do with Luther Dorman?"

She swallowed with extreme difficulty before she was able to speak again. "It's a little hard to talk about."

"Go ahead and take your time. It's Sunday and I've got all day. Now you go on and tell me what you're talking about."

"Well, you'll hear it from him if you don't hear it from me, so I might as well be the one to tell you first."

"Well, now, that's very considerate of you," Marcus said, rimming his words with a mild touch of sarcasm.

"You won't like it, but here it is anyway." In short, clipped words that were embarrassingly painful to speak, she told him the story of how she had run away from him that Saturday afternoon, had fled toward her play cabin in the woods, how she had taken the bottle of bourbon with her, then stumbled and fell; how Luther had come running up to her then, and how, in bitter anger at him, Marcus, she had permitted Luther to come along with her rather than remain behind to tell where she had run off to; and then, perhaps because of the bourbon, or to further revenge herself on Marcus, she had permitted Luther to possess her.

Marcus sat listening, his face purpling with anger as he felt an almost uncontrollable violence beginning to rise, yet holding himself

in check so she would have no excuse to walk out on him. This was the first move in a possible reconciliation, and however bitter the circumstance, he did not want to do anything that might block it, once again alienate her from him. His cigar had gone out during her recitation, and he continued to draw on it unconsciously, rolling it around in his mouth as a means to wet his dried lips. When she finished and sat with her hands clasped together in her lap, staring down at them, he said, "Well, now."

She waited in silence for his judgment, and when it came, it was less harsh than she had expected. Asperity had overcome earlier wisdom as he uttered the biting words. "Well, now. That's fine. Just fine. A nice story for a daughter to be telling her father. Now suppose you tell me so I'll know, too. Just who *was* Harriet's father? Was it that Harwick fellow or Luther Dorman? Not that it makes much difference now, the way I see it."

The cutting tone of his words brought a quick flush of resentment and indignation to her face, deep color spreading upward from her neck. "You know as well as I do who Harriet's father was. You knew it because you had me followed to Garrett's cottage and then—" her voice began to break and she turned away from him, face buried in cupped hands. For a moment he was contrite and thought of going to her to put his arms around her, hold and comfort her in this newest agony. Instead, he sat back stiffly in his chair, unable to make the move to alleviate her suffering.

"What did Luther have to say about it?" he asked finally, the sarcasm gone from his voice.

"He left here over an hour ago. He insists he is Harriet's father. His sister Carrie had written him casually one day, telling him that I had returned from New Orleans. With Harriet. Somehow, he managed to convince himself that he was her father. Now he is threatening to go into court, unless I admit that he is her father, and get a writ of some kind to declare him her true father and have her taken from me legally as—as—an unfit—mother if—if—"

"If what?" Marcus prodded.

"If I don't agree to marry him and give Harriet his name."

Now Marcus stood up and went to the decanter on his desk and poured a drink for himself. He drank it, then went to the chair in which Bethann sat, taking her hands from her face. Her head tilted upward, but her eyes were fastened on the second button of his shirt. "Look at me, Bethann," he said. She looked upward into his eyes.

He said quietly, "Garrett Harwick is dead. He's been dead for

over four years and nothing on earth or in this life of ours can bring him back. You and I, we've wasted those years, you in hatred for me because you blamed me for his death, I in mourning for the daughter I've always loved and cherished more than life itself."

She began to sob softly. Marcus released her hands and sat in the chair opposite her. "All right, Bethann, now you listen to me because the next half hour is probably going to be the most important one you'll ever have to face up to. All your life you've had it your own way, even to the last four years of treating me like I was a servant put here to supply your need to live like a queen. Oh, I'm not complaining because you've been spoiled. I did most of the spoiling myself, and loved doing it, so why should I complain? But it seems to me that a girl of your age and intelligence should be able to recognize by now which side of her cornbread the honey's been spread on."

The look on her face was one of acute discomfort as she listened to his words, heard him wipe out his complicity in Garrett's death and reassume the role of father so glibly.

"All this is going to end and it's going to end real soon—one way or another—and it had better be you who puts the end to it; because if you don't, Bethann, you may very well lose your baby."

Bethann turned suddenly as if to stand up and leave, but Marcus put out his hands and took hers into his again, motioning her to remain in the chair and hear him out.

"Now you listen to me before you go tearing out of here in a tantrum to do something else you'll regret for the rest of your life. If you don't want to go through the unpleasant experience of having yourself, your daughter, and Luther blasted over the radio and dragged into every newspaper and picture magazine in the world, only to find that national sympathy is on the side of the Medal of Honor hero, well, you might give some thought to marrying him and letting him legitimize Harriet just as he suggested. That way, the whole thing becomes simple. You get yourself a husband who is a national hero and it cuts down a lot of the quiet little stories, suspicions, and guesswork going around about you and the little one. If you do that, he won't start stirring things up and there won't be any publicity about Harriet that she'll have to face every day of her life. She's entitled to that privacy from you, and giving it to her is your responsibility as her mother.

"Meanwhile, you can make what kind of arrangements you want as far as living with Luther is concerned. Maybe in a year, when everything has died down and becomes quiet again, we'll get you

a divorce and you'll be free and rid of him. I'll take care of that end of it when the time is ripe. If you don't want to, you don't even have to live with him as man and wife. This house is still big enough to lose a husband in."

He sat listening to her hard breathing, wondering if she would be acquiescent to this suggestion, and as she sat thinking it over, he decided to amplify his plan.

"Meantime, I can fix things downtown with a license that will tell the whole world that you and Luther were secretly married before the war, right here in this very room, in the house in which you were born. I'll get a judge and we'll have two witnesses present—Newton and Sudie will do—whose names will appear in the records and on your license. I could see to the whole thing by tomorrow night if you're willing."

She was biting her lips, reluctant, thinking of all the various and devious ways she might avoid this—this action—unwilling to think of it in terms of a marriage; but Luther had somehow been smart enough to point the way, and Marcus had been quick to fall in with it.

"Can't you—can't you use—your influence, some persuasion—on him?" she asked. "You've got a lot to say about what might happen—"

He looked up, flushing angrily at what he considered was a reference to the old accusation that would again link him with Harwick. "Are you asking me to turn somebody loose on him, to shut him up, or run him out of town? Is that what you're asking me to do?" he snapped out quickly.

Coldly, brutally, she said, "You did it once before, didn't you?"

"You still insist that I killed that boy, don't you? And I insist I didn't put a finger on him or harm him in any way."

"I didn't say you did it personally, but—"

He leaned forward in his chair, his underlip curled into a near snarl. "Listen. You just listen to me for one minute, Bethann. For whatever it's worth to you, you came to me looking for advice, to help you out of a bad situation. I've just given you the advice and I'm willing to help you as best I know how. And now you turn around and throw another handful of dirt into my face for the trouble I've taken and am willing to take for you. Now why don't you go upstairs and have a real good, close look at your daughter? You sit up there and stare at her and consider one important possibility: that you might very well be on the verge of losing her. If you want to wrangle instead of trying to settle this thing in a way

that's best for you and Harriet, that's up to you. But, by God, when you feel the sting in some judge's lash on your back and you don't have your daughter to feed and bathe and dress any longer, you'll remember that you could have had her all the time. Also, you'll look back and recall that the year of inconvenience in a temporary marriage could have been mighty painless by comparison, particularly in the knowledge that after I find some way to pay Luther off, you'll be rid of him for good.

"Now if you don't like my advice and prefer your own, don't throw the blame to me if it doesn't work out exactly the way you hope it will. Hell, for the kind of behavior you've been showing me these past four years, I'd be inclined to say that a national hero is a shade more than you deserve!"

Stung by his words, Bethann leaped to her feet, faced him in anger, then turned and started for the door. She was in a blind fury, he knew, but not so enraged that she couldn't see the common sense of his argument. With as much calm as he could put into his voice, he said to her back, "Luther is coming to see me at the bank tomorrow morning. What do you want me to tell him?"

She stopped with her hand on the door handle, her back still to him; but she said nothing.

"You want to think it over for a while? I'll be home until three o'clock. After that I'm going downriver on Ed Pringle's boat for some fishing and a game of poker."

She turned back to him and her face was calm and sober. "If I agree, will you be satisfied with that? Seeing me married to—to that— Would you accept him as your son-in-law?"

Marcus shook his head and smiled lightly. "I might remind you that he is one of the biggest and most important names in the nation. He's quite a man now and he could be very useful."

"Useful. I suppose that's it. He can be useful to you with his new publicity value. In the same way that I can be useful to you by marrying him and giving him to you for a present."

Marcus said blandly, "You've still got a choice. Go ahead and do it your way. And when he goes to the papers and tells the public about the mother of his child—oh, sure, they'll believe him against you!—and how she admits that she once conducted herself lewdly and immorally—"

A bitter smile came over her. "You enjoy saying those things, don't you, Father. You with your queer, bisexual sheriff and that dirty, vicious deputy he's been living with all these years. Tell me you don't know what everybody in the whole county says about

those two. You, with your thieves in the City Hall, the County Courthouse, your bought judges and illegal bids on roads and buildings, your filthy back-alley political hoodlums and officials in Chancellor who take their share from every madam and gambler and moonshiner and dope peddler—”

“If that’s the kind of money you think I’ve been taking, just remember that you’ve been living on that kind of money all your life. This is hardly the time to turn your nose up at it, Bethann, not after taking it so uncomplainingly all these years, particularly the last three or four. It’s given you the comforts and luxuries of a very wealthy and carefully spoiled young woman, hasn’t it? New cars every year, clothes, jewelry, unlimited charge accounts, a bottomless checking account.” He broke off at that point and another silence ensued. Finally he spoke and his tone was sharp and clear now. “Well?” he asked.

She pulled the door open but did not go out, her hand still on the handle. Without turning to see his face, she said, “Tell him—tell him—all—right.”

All the defiance had been drained out of her voice.

Chapter 12

1.

When Luther left Radford Hall, he drove furiously toward the Dorman cottage, anger mingled with a certain relief that the unpleasant task was over. At least for the moment. He lifted his foot from the accelerator, allowing the Cadillac's speed to slacken.

The bluff he had thrown at Bethann—the threat of going to the law (that he had drawn out of thin air), the promise of again attracting national publicity (that he firmly believed he could do)—had been a strong dose, but he had seen its effect take hold of her, shake her; and for a fragmentary moment he felt a rush of pity for her helplessness, unwilling to hurt her this much, needing to overcome her resistance. Now he began to justify his action.

If Jud hadn't fallen from Marcus's roof, if he, Luther, had been able to continue in school, if his mother were still alive, if Carrie—If, if, if. He heaped one injustice atop the other and somehow, curiously, it all added up to something the Radfords were to blame for, should make up to him. And now he had the means to exact that payment.

As he came into the driveway, Carrie came out on the porch, began to speak, then waited until he came up the steps. He looked grim, somewhat deflated now, but he was still driving Mr. Marcus's car, she thought, so it can't be too bad. Might be he even lost his nerve at the last minute and changed his mind. This she hoped fervently.

"You got that corn I brought out yesterday?" he asked.

She nodded unhappily, hating to see him in this mood. "Get a bottle of it out, will you?" he asked. "I need a drink right now."

He went into the kitchen and sat at the table, waiting for her to bring the bottle and a glass to him. "Get another one for yourself, will you, Carrie? I'm not like him. I hate to drink by myself."

She brought the other glass reluctantly and he poured a small drink for her, a larger one for himself.

"What happened at the Hall?" she asked.

He looked up without any change of expression. "I saw her," he said flatly.

"The baby?"

"No, not the baby. Her. Miss Bethann."

"Did—did you—say—did you tell her—?"

"You mean did I tell her I know the baby is mine? Sure, I told her. And I told her a few other things, too. I told her that if she don't make up her mind damned soon that she's going to marry me and give that baby her real daddy's name, I'm going to take the baby away from her. And I can do it, too, by God!" he added belligerently.

Carrie's eyes opened wide with amazement. "You—you told her *that*? You talked like that to Miss Bethann?"

"I sure as hell did. And I meant every word of it. She knows I can do it, too," he said with added hostility. "And what's more, she knows I'm going to see Mr. Marcus tomorrow and that I'm going to tell him the same thing."

Her voice reached barely above a whisper as she cried, "Oh, Luther, you don't know what you're doing. Not just to Miss Bethann, but what you'll be getting into if—if—"

"Yes, I do, Carrie. I know what I'm getting into."

"Luther, Luther," she pleaded, "you don't even *know* what the real truth is. You don't!"

"What kind of talk is that, coming from you? What kind of a sister are you, for Chrissakes? You think I don't know that baby is mine as much as it is Miss Bethann's?"

Carrie studied Luther's face as he spoke. When he finished, she laughed suddenly. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"Luther, can't you see? It's you. Talking about marrying a girl and still calling her 'Miss' Bethann. People getting married don't call each other 'Miss' or 'Mister.'"

"Well, don't let that bother you a bit. Once we get married, what I call her ain't going to make much difference. I'll be Marcus Radford's son-in-law. Think about that, Carrie. Me. Marcus Radford's own son-in-law, daddy to his only grandchild. I'll be married kin to the richest man in the county, one of the richest in the state."

He tipped his glass toward hers, sitting empty on the table. "Come on, Carrie, ain't you going to drink a toast to me? Hell, this ought to be a real celebration for both of us."

Carrie shook her head. "Not for me, Luther. I'm getting a little woozy. And I think you'd better stop now, too."

He got up and walked over to the kitchen window and looked out into the yard, then came back to the table and sat down again. "Right now, I feel fine. Just fine," he said. He picked up the glass and finished the drink. "You know, Carrie, when I was up there in Washington, sleeping in that big Statler Hotel in the best suite they had there, eating the finest food and having people come up to shake hands and ask for my autograph, I found out one important thing: I was traveling first class for the first time in my whole life. Even in the Army hospital in England I had my own private room, special nurses and doctors who took care of me like I was the richest man in the country. That was real class. I was sitting right smack on top of the whole world then. Yes, sir! They flew me back to Washington in a special plane, took me to the White House, everything first class all the way: meals, trains, planes, hotels, everything paid for. All I had to say was 'I want—' and there it was: cigarettes, food, drinks, fresh new uniforms, and somebody to bring it to me." His voice rose through his excitement, husky with drink, as the picture of his triumphs paraded before him again. "Christ *Almighty!* All the way from England with my own nurse, my own doctor and orderly, and Harry Bledso, a lieutenant, just to look after me. I'm telling you, Carrie, I was like a rich flea that owned his own kennel full of dogs!"

Carrie said, "I guess you got a taste for those things now, haven't you, Luther?"

"Well, all I can say is I'd be crazy if I didn't. I been thinking about the things I've seen and done and the people I met, seeing everything and doing things I never even dreamed of before; and all I got to say is this: *You got to have money!* No two ways about it, Carrie, *you just got to have money to go first class!* One day people are going to forget all about the Luther Dorman who won a Medal of Honor, and then I'll be just like any other man around here, either driving a moonshine truck or plowing a furrow, planting seed, harvesting crops. All for somebody else, and wondering how in hell I'm going to make ten dollars do a hundred dollars' worth of work. But not if I'm Marcus Radford's son-in-law. No, sir!"

The tip of his tongue flicked out and brushed the corner of his mouth to wet it. Then he said, hungrily, "Right now I've got a chance to keep on being somebody, to get my hands on some money. Radford money. And come hell or tomorrow, whichever is first, I'm going to do it, by God!"

Carrie sat in smoldering, impotent anger at his words. When he

finished, she said, "Is that all you want, the Radford money? You think you're entitled to get it that way?"

"And why not? You tell me that, Carrie. One way or another we been working for the Radfords all our lives. You, me, him. Even Ma. And what're we got to show for it? Any time he wanted, he could of pulled the rug out from under us, throwed us out of this house to go live off town relief. But it's different now. A whole lot different."

He came back to the table, poured another drink, sat down, and tilted the chair back on two legs.

"Listen, Carrie, I don't ever aim to work for another man, or break land that ain't my own. I've seen a certain kind of freedom and independence that I want for myself, for you, and I'm going to get it even if I have to fight or kill to get it, and if I don't, I'm a sure bet for the loonybin. One thing I know: I don't want to live the way my father lived or die the way he's going to die."

"What you mean is you're going to hold your gun up to Miss Bethann's head and make her marry you so you can be Marcus Radford's son-in-law and someday take over in his place. Is that it? Is that the ambition you brought home with your Medal of Honor? What kind of medal do you think you ought to get for *that* kind of honor?"

"You know anybody else got a better right to it?" Luther demanded. He poured another drink for himself. Carrie said, "Give me one, too. I'll need it for what I've got to tell you."

With a quizzical grin he poured the drink for her and they both drank at once. "Now what do you mean by that crack?" he asked when she put her glass down, her face now flushed with the consumed alcohol.

"Just this, Luther. You may really believe that you're that baby's father, but I know you're not."

Luther grinned. "You and Miss Bethann think a lot alike, but I know different. Besides, how would you know anything about it?"

"Luther," Carrie said quietly, "you're not the father of Miss Bethann's baby. And not any of your thinking or self-convincing is going to make you her father."

He returned her stare, saw the grimness in her face, heard it in her words. "Wha—what are you talking about anyway, Carrie?"

"I'm talking about you and Miss Bethann and Miss Bethann's baby, that's what I'm talking about. Oh, Lord, you're going to hate me, and I don't want you to, but I've got to keep you from making a fool out of yourself in front of Mr. Marcus."

His voice was completely belligerent now. "You go ahead. Go

ahead and tell me, if you know so much about it. Go ahead, Carrie."

Carrie's eyes were tear-filled now. "All right, now, you listen to me for a change. You remember just before the war broke out there was a fellow found in the street in front of the County Hospital, almost dead? They couldn't save him, he was shot up so bad. And he died the same day. You remember that?"

Luther frowned, struggling to remember. "Sure. Sure, I remember," he said slowly. "He was a teacher, wasn't he, from the high school?"

Carrie nodded. "You remember what his name was?"

She could see the effort in his attempt to remember, the beads of perspiration over the furrows in his forehead. "Har—Hartung, was it? Something like that? Anyway, what's that got to do with what we're talking about?"

"Everything, Luther. Try to remember. It was something like Hartung. The first part, anyway."

"Har—Har—Hartick—wick—Harwick. That's it! Harwick, wasn't it?"

She nodded. "That was it. Harwick. Garrett Harwick."

"All right, so his name was Garrett Harwick. So what?"

"Just this, Luther. Garrett Harwick was the father of that baby. And that's why he was found in that condition. Marcus Radford found out about it from Miss Bethann herself, *before you spent that night in the woods with her*. Then somebody—they say around that it was that mean and ugly deputy of Sheriff Bartly's—went down to his place on the river and finished him off on account of it. They say Mr. Marcus sent the deputy down to drive him out of town, but it didn't work out that way. And that's why she hasn't spoken more than a dozen or two words to her own daddy since she came back."

Luther looked at her in complete, startled astonishment. "You're—you're just making that up. You don't know what you're talking about. I don't believe it."

"Luther," she pleaded with fierceness. "*Listen to me!* I'm your sister and I love you and I don't want you to get hurt! Listen! For one thing, you take that baby's name. Harriet. You know where it comes from? I'll tell you. It comes from the first part of his last name and the last part of his first name. Garrett Harwick. HAR from HARwick. ETT from GARrett. HAR. ETT. Don't you see it, Luther? If he wasn't the father, why would she go to such a lot of trouble to piece his name together into a name of her baby?"

Still Luther did not believe her. "It can't be. I didn't dream I slept in that cabin with her all night. *I know it happened!* I know

it! Goddamn it, Carrie, she even admitted it to me today when she talked to me."

"I believe that part of it, even if I can't understand it," Carrie said, "but she was already carrying Garrett Harwick's baby inside her when it happened. I can't explain why she—she—was up there in the woods with you. Maybe she did it to hurt Mr. Marcus for having killed Garrett Harwick. Or thought he was the one had it done."

Luther raised a fist and slammed it down on the table, for the first time seeing his dream of financial security and independence about to be washed down the drain. He sat, fist still clenched on the table where he had struck it. "I don't believe it," he repeated. "Anyway, even if it is true, I still think I got a chance to pull it off. If I—"

Carrie's eyes flashed angrily. "*Luther!*" she snapped. "You sitting there telling me you'd go ahead with your crazy scheme *anyhow*, now you know you've been wrong about the whole thing, just so you can marry Miss Bethann for Mr. Marcus's money? Is that what you're saying? You can't do it, Luther! You hear me? *You can't do it!* It's dirty and dishonest! Blackmail is what it is!"

"No such thing, Carrie," Luther retorted. "It's no such thing. It's a chance, my one chance to get out of a sinkhole. I got to take it, Carrie, else I'll end up like *him*. A nothing. Nothing but a nothing!"

"Luther," Carrie cried out piteously, "you can't do it! Mr. Marcus has been too good to all of us. You get him riled and there's no end of things he can do to you."

Luther picked up the bottle, then put it down again. "I can't even think straight any more," he said. "I can't figure it out in my own head like I had it all figured out before. I got to get out and get me some fresh air."

He stood up quickly and walked down the hallway, dragging a hand along the wall to steady himself. Carrie sat at the table until she heard the car start, then wheel out of the lane. She began crying softly to herself as she took the two glasses from the table to the sink and let the water run over them.

2.

Luther got to the end of the lane and headed the car into the main highway. Which way, he thought to himself. Back to the hotel or along the river somewhere to cool off? Maybe to see Lutie, he told himself, knowing all the while that it was not Lutie who was drawing him like a magnet to the Hagen house.

He pulled the car into an easy stop at the front porch, set the brake, and walked up the steps and knocked on the door.

A muffled voice called out from the interior of the house, and he could not distinguish it as either Ruth-Rachel's or Lutie's. He opened the screen door and pushed the wooden door in and stepped into the hallway. On either side was a room, and he peered first into one, then the other, but both were empty. He went slowly along the dark hallway, stopped and called, "Hello, there. Anybody home?"

A door opened on the left side farther along the hallway and a shaft of light entered the darkness of the hallway and he saw a figure coming toward him. At first he thought it was Ruth-Rachel, but as she came closer to him, he realized it was Lutie Hagen. She came toward him and he retreated to the front room on his right, the parlor. She followed him into the room, dressed in exactly the same way Ruth-Rachel had been dressed the day before—a nondescript black garment that had neither fit nor form and hung loosely from her shoulders without any sign that she had waist or hips. In Lutie's face were the lines of her years and grief, and she had made no effort to remove their gloomy traces.

Lutie looked at Luther with an eager, terrier-sharpness in her eyes, her clawlike fingers stretched out toward him, and he could not tell whether this was in greeting to him or an act of self-defense on her part. Her voice came to him now, shrill and waspish, and he realized then that she had not recognized him.

"Who are you?" she screeched shrewishly. "What do you want here? We got nothin' here for men. *Men!* Always hanging aroun' like maggots over a rat's carcass. You get out of here! She's locked in her room and she's going to *stay* locked in her room. Out!" She made a brushing sign with her hand toward the front door.

Luther pulled back to one side to avoid the slashing motion of her bony arm and hand. As she flung it past him, he reached out and caught her wrist, held it firmly. She yanked away from his touch as though she had been seared by a tongue of flame. He stood his ground, watching the glitter of her perspiration-wet face.

"Aunt Lutie—" he began. She wheeled back to face him, eyes opened more widely now, a hank of wet hair falling down over her face. "Who're yo', callin' me by my name?"

"It's me, Aunt Lutie. Luther Dorman. You known me since I was a little boy. I was a friend of your Dale's. I come by special, just to see you."

"You!" she gasped. He released his grip on her arm and she stood glaring at him, suspicion written across her face. "You.

Luther Dorman. You was there with him, wasn't you? You was with him when he died. The papers said so. The man on the radio said so."

"They were right, Aunt Lutie. I was there with Dale."

She began to sob, clasping her skeletal hands together in front of her as if in appeal. "You," she said again, "you could have saved him if you was there. *Couldn't you?* You was there! *Why didn't you save him?* *Why?* You come from the same town, lived along the same road as him. Why couldn't you of helped my boy, my Dale? He was a good boy. He loved his mother. He did. *He did!*"

She began rocking and swaying back and forth, her words becoming a meaningless jumble of rasping moans, her hands moving up and down and from left to right, making the sign of the Cross. "Lord, Lord, help me, I beseech Thee. Help me over my moment of trial. And, Lord, I ask You to bring down Your curse on any man who could've helped save my boy and turned his back on him. Do this for me, Lord, and I will be Thy willing and faithful servant until the day You welcome me into Thine arms! This I pray!"

Luther stared in bewilderment as she marched militantly past him, crying and praying. She went down the hallway, and after a moment he followed, saw her go into a room, heard the door slam shut. Then he heard the pounding on the other door, heard a voice calling out. Luther paused beside the door opposite Lutie's. Inside he could hear Ruth-Rachel's voice calling, "Let me out of here! Let me out!"

He twisted the knob, but the door was locked. Ruth-Rachel began to pound the door with her fists again. "Hold it, Ruth-Rachel," he called to her. When the pounding stopped, he grasped the knob, put his shoulder to the door, leaned away from it, then saw the iron key was in the lock. He turned it, twisted the knob, and the door opened. An angered Ruth-Rachel stood before him, dressed in a pale yellow form-fitting dress, open in a deep V at the throat, belted at the waist. Her hair shone like newly minted gold and her lips were touched up freshly and delicately. She wore flesh-tinted stockings and new white-and-tan shoes. This was the radiant Ruth-Rachel he could remember in place of the drab scarecrow of yesterday.

"I told you so, didn't I?" she exclaimed, pointing to Lutie's door. "I told you she was crazy. Now you know for yourself!"

She came out into the hallway and turned toward the front of the house and Luther followed her, stunned by the overnight change in her. In the front room she turned slowly around for his inspection

and admiration. "I took the bus into town after you left me last evening and I bought two dresses and some shoes and a lot of other things. Then I had my hair done and came home. She like to tore her hair out when she saw me with all those packages, ranting and raving and cursing like she is now. I went in my room and locked myself in until she went away. Then I came out and locked the door again and took a bath. I took this one outfit with me to dress up in, and when I came back, she'd got another key and got inside my room and tore everything else to shreds. I got so mad I could've killed her. I wish I had! Tearing up a new dress and slips and stockings and all! While I was looking at the damage she done, she locked me in my room and—and—"

"Sh-h-h, Ruth-Rachel," Luther tried to calm her. "Just take it easy. She's a sick old woman. Besides, there'll be more where this came from. I promise you. Let her be. She needs—"

"I know what she needs. She needs the same medicine she's been taking all this time. Corn whiskey."

"You got any around?" he asked.

"She's got lots of it around. Mostly its outside under the kitchen porch. There's a box underneath where the nigger she buys it from leaves it for her all the time."

Luther went down the dark hallway again, through the kitchen and outside. He bent over and under the porch steps saw the wooden box with four empty whiskey bottles and two that were full. He took one and brought it into the house. He put the bottle on the table in the kitchen, then went to Lutie's room, opened the door, and stepped inside. A huge brass bedstead had been pushed into one corner, a large double-doored mahogany wardrobe beside it. On the other side of the wardrobe was a child's crib and in it stood a large doll, dressed in boy's clothes, surrounded by toys, most of them old, some new and recent. The doll wore a black velvet jacket and to it was pinned a scrap of brown paper with the name "DALE" printed crudely on it in colored crayon.

On the wall behind and to one side of the crib were two photographs and perhaps fifteen or twenty small snapshots, showing Dale Hagen in various stages of boyhood through young manhood, when he left home to go into military service. There was one photograph on a table in the center of the room, a formal picture of Dale in uniform. Through the filigree of the frame, his Silver Star was pinned. Most of the pictures were of Dale alone; some were with male friends. There were two or three showing him with Lutie, but nowhere was there a picture that showed him with Ruth-

Rachel. Some had been trimmed out with a razor blade or scissors, and Luther guessed that Lutie may have cut Ruth-Rachel out of these in order to have Dale all to herself.

Lutie was kneeling on the floor beside the bed, praying. He took a step toward her, and she turned around and snarled savagely, "What right you got comin' in here? Get out of here! This is my house and you got no business here. And you leave his Jezebel alone, too!"

Luther turned and saw that Ruth-Rachel was standing beside him, then turned back to Lutie as he heard her raging voice once more. "You, you were with my boy when he got killed and didn't even raise a hand to help him! Did you, boy? And you'll pay for it, come your time to face your Maker. I been praying to Him and He given me His Word; you'll pay for it. You'll pay for it, boy! Both of you!"

She got up and tried to brush past him, lunging at Ruth-Rachel, but Luther caught her arms again and held her while Ruth-Rachel escaped to the kitchen.

"Aunt Lutie, you listen to me," Luther said. "I got a message for you from Dale. Like I said, I was with him when he died, but it was too late for me to do anything for him. He gave me a message for you, and if you'll just hold still and listen, I'll tell it to you."

His lie had the desired effect upon her. Suddenly the hard tension went out of her and she was relaxed. The lines in her forehead disappeared and her eyes were wider open now and softer. "You mean—Dale—he gave you his last sacred words to carry home to me?"

Luther nodded. "He did, Aunt Lutie. He knew I'd see you if I got out all right, so he told me, he said, 'When you get home, Luther, you go see my mother and give her my last, dying words.'"

Tears sprang into her eyes. "Tell me," she said. "Tell me what he said."

"I will, Aunt Lutie. I promise. First, let's get out of here." He released her arms and she followed him, docile, but breathing heavily, into the hallway and to the kitchen. He went to the table and uncorked the bottle of whiskey, and Ruth-Rachel, standing near the china cupboard, brought out two glasses.

"I need a drink," Luther said. "You have one with me, Aunt Lutie?"

"It's medicine for me. Spirits for my health's sake, the doctor told me. I take it to keep up my strength."

Luther poured about an inch of the whiskey into his tumbler

and put the bottle into Lutie's outstretched, trembling hand. She poured half a glass for herself, gulped at it, downed it entirely by the time Luther had sipped a part of his own. Lutie pushed her glass toward Luther for another filling.

"You goin' a tell me what my son told you to tell me?" she demanded.

Luther picked up the bottle and replenished her glass, pushed it across the table to her. "Well, Aunt Lutie," Luther began, "like I told you, I came up to where Dale was laying in that German machine-gun emplacement. He'd thrown a grenade into it and I guess he thought he'd killed all the Germans in it. He came up to see if he had, but one of them had just enough life left in him to fire his pistol at Dale, hit him, and then died himself. I heard that one shot and came downwind to the place and found Dale there. I tried to do what I could for him, but it was too late. Dale knew it and he told me to stop trying to help him and listen."

He needed another drink to continue the fantasy he was weaving, this lie he knew Lutie Hagen had to hear from him. He poured another drink for himself and one for Lutie.

"Dale knew it was almost over. He said to me, 'You make it out of here, Luther, you tell my mother that my dying thoughts were of her. You tell her I love her and I always loved her more than—'" he glanced at Ruth-Rachel who wore a faint smile on her lips—"anybody else in the whole world. You tell her she shouldn't mourn for me because, wherever I am, I'll know it, and if she cries and mourns for me, I'm going to be mighty unhappy about that.'"

Lutie sat with one hand clenching the glass, her face charged with eagerness to hear more. "You tell her for me," he went on, encouraged, "I want her to be the fine and kind lady I know she is, to dress herself up nice and go to church regular, and that kind of thing. I'll be—gone—but I'll still be her son for as long as eternity, and someday she and I are going to be together again. How long it takes won't make no difference because where I'm going, time don't mean nothing.'"

Lutie's head was lowered now, eyes closed, but the tears were streaming down her cheeks as her mouth moved and twitched and mewled with small animal-like sounds. He looked again at Ruth-Rachel and she nodded encouragingly.

"He told me to tell you to live well until the time when you and he would be together and to remember that, no matter what hap-

pens, you are his mother and that in the Hereafter all mothers and sons will be reunited."

A loud sob came from Lutie's twisting lips and her hands were again clasped as if in prayer.

"He said, 'Tell Ma she's got to leave Ruth-Rachel go. She ain't no blood kin of hers. She ain't even my wife any more. Tell her to cut her loose and let her live her own life because where I am going, I won't have no thoughts for nobody but my mother.'"

Luther stopped talking then and Lutie's eyes opened slowly. She looked first at Ruth-Rachel, who stood at the sink staring with some apprehension; then Lutie's eyes shifted to Luther. She lifted the glass in front of her and sipped the last few drops, put the glass down, and Luther poured another drink into it.

"My son was a good son," she said, "the best son God ever gave to a mother. An' then, like the one in Eden, came a serpent into my life an' home an' took my son away from me, using her wiles an' tricks an' her body on him. An' she weakened him even as Delilah weakened Samson, seducing him with her wantonness until he didn't know right from wrong." Lutie lifted the glass to her mouth and drank from it. Her head was swaying unsteadily, and a trickle of the whiskey ran out of the side of her mouth, down her neck, and inside her black dress. She put the glass down with a bang that rocked the bottle and the other glass in front of Luther. She continued, her voice thick and rasping.

"Lor', I thank Thee f'hearin' m'prayers. I'm gray—grayful You brung me shome word from my—myshon." Her voice began to taper off into a whisper and her grip on the table edge relaxed. She leaned forward, her arms folded before her, and as her head dropped down upon them, her sobbing, tearful voice spoke once again, saying, "I can' talk no more to You now, Lord. I'll have somethin' to shay to You t'morrow."

She lay for a moment while her thin shoulders trembled. The movement grew still. Her hands opened as she relaxed in unconsciousness.

Luther rose to his feet, a feeling of deep pain and guilt coming over him. He poured a small drink for himself, stood looking down first upon Lutie, then to Ruth-Rachel, who was staring into his eyes, her own opened widely in wonderment, or fear, at what they had witnessed. He turned back to Lutie, bent over, and lifted her frail body easily, carried her along the hallway to her room and placed her on her bed, then shut the door and walked toward the front of the house. Ruth-Rachel had preceded him. As he came into the

room, she said, "Luther," but he continued past her to the door, opened it, and stepped out on the porch. She came out behind him.

"She'll be all right now, Luther," she said.

He nodded without speaking.

"Luther, take me away from here with you. I don't care where you're going. I just don't want to stay here now. If I can't get out, something will happen, I know it will. I've been cooped up with her too long. It's like being locked up with a corpse, like living in the same coffin with somebody."

He walked to the edge of the porch. Dusk had given way to night and the stars sparkled with brilliance in the dark blue sky. Much of the earlier heat was gone and he could feel some cooling relief in the small breeze that came off the river, rustling the leaves in the trees that surrounded the house. Ruth-Rachel came closer and he could feel her next to him, smell the perfume of her beside him, wanting to turn to look at her in the waning light, feeling once more a sense of fear, the nearness of Dale Hagen about him.

"Luther," she said.

He turned to her without speaking.

"How do you like my new outfit?" she asked. She held her arms out from her sides and turned slowly for his examination, fully conscious of the compelling picture she made in the yellow dress that hugged her body closely, the forward thrust of her high, firm breasts accented by her slim waist. She turned back to him and the full skirt swirled upward, then dropped as she came to a stop just inside his arms. She saw the glint in his eyes, heard his labored breathing, saw the tip of his tongue as it moistened a corner of his mouth.

Her arms curled upward and around his neck, and Luther looked down into her eyes. Slowly, his arms enveloped her, feeling the form and outline of her body against his own, defining it as it moved sensually within the curve of himself. His head moved forward, and then he felt her parted lips upon his mouth, moving across it, kissing each corner of his mouth. His arms gripped her close and hard, crushing her, his kiss moving up and down on her cheek, to her neck, then upward to her hair.

"Luther," she said softly, eagerly

"No. No, Ruth-Rachel. I can't. I can't. Not now."

"Luther, Luther, don't leave me. She won't wake up now. I know she won't."

"Ruth-Rachel, it's not Lutie. It's not her. It's—it's Dale."

"Dale? Luther, Dale's *dead*. Don't you start talking like *her* now. He's dead and buried. He was killed in Germany and you were there and saw him die. But we're still alive, Luther. You and me. It's all right, Luther. I tell you *it's all right!*"

He stood clinging to her. She pulled away slightly and lifted one of his hands, guiding it inside her dress, over one naked breast.

"Ruth-Rachel, no! *No! I can't!*" he exclaimed. He tore himself away and, without a glance backward, ran to the car, got in, and drove quickly away.

In the morning Luther woke with the feeling of having been drugged. Ruth-Rachel had been a principal participant in his night-long dreams; awake now, she was still on his mind, as he had seen her last night, heard her whispering tensely, "*But we're still alive, Luther. You and me. It's all right, Luther!*"

He stirred and squirmed, hoping he might be able to fall asleep again. As he turned on his side, he saw the square of white that had been shoved under the door into the room. He tried to turn his mind from it, but the memory of it came back to nag him into getting up. He walked across the room unsteadily, picked up the paper, and saw that it was one of the hotel's regular telephone messages folded over.

The message said that Mr. Radford had called at 8:50 asking that Sergeant Dorman call upon him at his convenience that morning.

This would be it, he thought, this discussion with Mr. Marcus that would decide his future. One way or the other. His way and riches or Carrie's way and doom. What would happen this morning could very well decide whether he would go back to being what he was before the war—a truck driver for the moonshining syndicate or dirt farmer—or he might be taking the giant step toward what he had learned to call "going first class."

He ignored the morning paper the waiter laid beside his plate, his offer to bring eggs and bacon or breakfast pork chops, delaying the moment when he must get up and walk across the Square to the bank and face his Destiny, or Fate, or Divine Guidance—all in the form of Mr. Marcus Audrey Radford. The ease to which he had so easily and willingly become accustomed: the expensive car he was driving, the house he might be living in, Miss Bethann herself, the wonderful world of servants and money and clothes and travel; that Heaven on earth known only to the wealthy—all these would be at stake. He could make one false move and Mr. Marcus would sweep

all of it away from in front of him, out of his reach forevermore. So easily. And yet it was all so close, close enough for him to *feel* it.

The waiter picked up the silver coffeepot, shook it, asked Luther if he would like to have it refilled.

"What?" Luther asked, startled out of his dream.

"More coffee, sir? This pot, she's just about empty."

"Oh. No. No more. I'm leaving."

"Yes, sir." The waiter placed the check and pencil before him and Luther quickly signed his name, added a fifty-cent tip to the total. *And this, too, he thought, will be gone. Fifty cents just for bringing me a pot of coffee and standing around doing nothing until I sign the check. Christ Almighty! Fifty cents just for that! How many fifty-cent pieces does it take to make up the hundred dollars I handed to Ruth-Rachel just like I was signing for something that somebody else would pay for?* He gave a short laugh, pushed back the chair, put on his peaked cap at a rakish angle, and walked out into the sunlight of the Square.

Marcus Radford got out of the huge leather chair to greet him with a smile and an extended hand, guided him to one of the wide leather side chairs, and offered him a cigar from the humidor. Luther shook his head, smiled his thanks, and took out his own pack of cigarettes, meanwhile searching the older man's face for some sign that might indicate feelings other than the friendliness he was displaying. He saw none. Radford seated himself behind the desk and swiveled around to face Luther.

"Well," he said. "I hope you've been having a nice visit with your friends and folks, Luther."

"Yes, sir, I have, Mr. Radford. And I sure do thank you for the loan of your car. It came in mighty handy for getting around."

Marcus held up a hand, smiling away Luther's thanks. "Not at all, my boy. You go right on using it. How did you find your sister? And—your—father?"

"They're all right, sir. Carrie's fine. We had a lot of catching up to do. Pa, well, I guess there's nothing much can be done about him—for a while, anyway."

"I'm sorry I didn't get to see you when you stopped by the Hall yesterday. You got away before I knew you were there. Sudie told me—"

Luther flushed self-consciously. "I—I didn't want to interrupt you on a Sunday. Sudie told me you were sleeping. I—I—well, I hadn't seen Miss Bethann since I got back, and I got to wondering if she

was sick maybe, and being so close by, I thought I'd just run past and ask after her."

"Well, that was very neighborly of you and I know she appreciated your visit. It might surprise you to know that she's always thought highly of you."

"Thank you, sir."

"Well, suppose we get down to the business order of the day. I wonder if you've given any more serious thought to what you would like to do when your Army days are over. Not that there's any rush, you understand, Luther, but if you have some ideas, perhaps we could work them out between now and the day you're released from active duty."

Luther said speculatively, "The best I could come up with right now, Mr. Marcus, is what we were talking over up in Washington before Lieutenant Bledso and I got here. A few people up there, they seemed to think the same as Harry, that I should maybe try to get me some backing for a political office while I was still being remembered so kindly by folks everywhere."

Marcus was waving his hand patiently before him. "Now, Luther," he said blandly, "it's just like I said before, you've got to get that notion out of your head about going into politics. Like going into a business, it takes knowledge, backing, and a lot of money. Those people back in Washington don't know much about our kind of politics down here in Regis, nor up in Chancellor. What young Bledso didn't realize the other day was that our commitments are already made for the county and state tickets, and we can't have some newcomer—even you, Luther—coming in this late and upsetting the apple cart. I'm sure you wouldn't want to do that, would you, Luther?"

Luther's eyebrows raised innocently. "Me, Mr. Radford? Not me. No, sir, I wouldn't do a thing like that."

"Well, now, that's just fine. We can work something out that'll do you a lot of good and no one else any harm. First thing we're going to do, Luther, is to get you discharged from the Army as soon as we can."

"You mean you can have that done, Mr. Marcus? Even with the war still going on in the Pacific?"

"Yes, sir. You've done more than your part. I talked to Earl Butcher last night and again this morning, and he's already been calling some people in the Pentagon. I don't think it'll be much longer before you're a civilian, Luther, not more than a week or two at the most, according to Earl."

"Well—"

"Of course. With the right connections almost anything can be done. Now what do you think you'd like to do?"

"I—I don't rightly know, Mr. Radford. You know I didn't get much in the way of schooling or training for—well, working in an office or any such jobs as that. Most of what I learned in the Army, I don't think we need around here in Regis."

"No," Radford laughed, "and that's a sure fact, Luther. Suppose I tell you what I've had in mind. You might not take to this, but if you will just believe that all I have in mind is for your good—"

Luther smiled. "I'm sure of that, if I'm not sure of anything else. I never had anybody in my whole life take such a close interest in me before and, believe me, I appreciate it, Mr. Radford."

"All right, then, suppose you listen and hear me out. I guess you know what everybody else in Regis knows about Bethann; it's no secret that she left town four years ago, then came home less than a year later with a baby daughter. This comes hard for a father to be telling to somebody outside his own family, but we Radfords have known you Dormans for a good many years, so it's almost the same as talking within the family. Now the deed has been done and not talking about it won't undo it."

Luther looked away, reached for his packet of cigarettes, took one out and lighted it as Marcus continued.

"The next thing is, like any other man, I've always wanted a son of my own and never had one, Bethann being the only issue between my wife and me before she died, God rest her soul. Of course, the only way I can have a son is for Bethann to marry the kind of man I'd like to have for a son, a man who would someday be able to step into my shoes and take over when I've passed on."

Marcus stopped for a moment to assess the reception of his words thus far and was rewarded with an expression of open astonishment as Luther's mind raced ahead in turmoil, trying to make himself believe what he was hearing. "Until now," he heard Marcus pick up the conversation again, "there hasn't been anyone I've wanted to bring in and begin training to do just that, but I expect to be around for a few years, and in that time I could teach a man all he would need to know."

Luther's head moved up and down in idle agreement and seemed almost eager to reply, when the phone rang and Marcus, annoyed with the interruption, lifted the receiver and spoke into it. "I told you I didn't want to be—" He listened for a moment. "Oh. All right, put him on." To Luther he said, "Excuse me, son."

Luther got up and walked to the far end of the room, staring at the impressively bound commercial books on the shelves while Marcus spoke into the phone, listened occasionally.

Was this it, Luther thought. Was Marcus Radford actually agreeing to his marrying Miss Bethann, with the bank, the Hall, and everything else involved, just to give that baby a name? Hell, they didn't need Luther Dorman just for that, did they? There must be some catch, something of which he was unaware. Or had Miss Bethann really told Mr. Marcus the entire story and Mr. Marcus felt that Luther was holding every one of the top cards in his hands? Or, if it was true that Mr. Marcus had been the man responsible for the death of that fellow Harwick, could he be planning more of the same for Luther after the marriage had been made, the baby named, and all the talk quieted down?

He glanced around at Marcus, still speaking into the receiver and smiling. He heard Marcus say, "Good-by, Earl. You call me as soon as you hear something on it," and hung up. He turned and said to Luther, "That was Earl Butcher again. He's on his way over to the Pentagon this very minute to take up that discharge matter with the right people personally. We ought to have some definite word soon."

Luther smiled his thanks and went back to his chair. Marcus said, "Now, Luther, I've been thinking this thing out over the weekend. A boy like you who has done very well for himself already ought to be thinking in terms of going ahead; otherwise, he could fall into bad hands and ways and ruin himself, make a mockery of the high honor he has received."

"Yes, sir," Luther agreed easily

"A boy like you, if he was smart, would get himself married and settled while he's got all the best of it going for him, right now while the eyes of the whole nation are on him. You've got to remember that you're not going to get a free ride for the rest of your life because of that medal. The war will be over in the Pacific soon and then the free rides will come to an end, and when that happens the only break you'll have will be the fact that you came out of it alive. From there on, it will be up to you."

"I guess you're right, Mr. Radford, and I'd be willing to listen to any advice you could give me," Luther said easily.

Marcus shot Luther a quick glance and a tight little smile turned his mouth in a slight upward curve. "You willing to listen to a proposition, Luther?"

There was not even the slightest hesitation in Luther's voice as

he looked up and said coolly, "What do you have in mind, Mr. Marcus?"

Radford answered just as coolly, "You and my Bethann. Getting married right away. That's what I've got in mind."

Now that it was out, Luther continued to stare at Radford, fighting to hide the overwhelming elation he felt in this complete victory, wondering how it could be so simple and easy for all the worrying he had done over it. And Carrie, too. Now, for the great Marcus Radford to be so eager—? And after the things Miss Bethann had said to him yesterday. And suddenly the thought came to him, *Well, why not? Just why the hell not?* After all, there must be some value in him even to Marcus Radford, in a man who had been designated by the Congress of the United States to be decorated with the nation's highest honor, delivered to him personally by the President. After all, he was trading a lot for the right to become the husband of a girl with an illegitimate daughter. In time, when people would forget the war and the circumstances of their marriage, they would probably forget their earlier suspicions that surrounded the woman who would bear his name. So again, why the hell not? He'd had Bethann once before, and even though someone else had had her earlier, and that man had fathered her child, he was dead now; and what difference did that make? Suppose she and this Harwick had actually been married and divorced; or if Harwick had died a natural death, or been killed in the war? What difference did it really make? Nothing could restore her virginity again, take her daughter back again, could it? The only difference would be the few words the preacher would say over them that hadn't been said over her and Harwick. He would marry Bethann and consider that she was a widow with a daughter. If—oh, hell, he thought, if, if, if, and to hell with it! I'll do it and I won't be sorry for it. At least, if I am, I'll be getting paid plenty for my troubles.

Radford interrupted his thoughts. "Well, Luther, what do you think?"

Luther said softly, "How about I give you my answer in a few days, Mr. Marcus?"

"Why not now, Luther?" Radford suggested with a smile. "Why not strike while the iron is hot? Things have a way of changing overnight, sometimes."

"You talk to Miss Bethann about it, Mr. Marcus? Is she—uh—agreeable to it?"

"She's agreeable, Luther."

There was another long pause and Marcus cleared his throat and said, "I'll take care of all the arrangements. There will be some—little—subterfuge, Luther, but I'm sure you will understand that it is necessary. The application for the marriage license, the license, the marriage itself, will all be dated back to sometime before you went into the Army, say two or three months before. The baby's birth certificate will be corrected to show you to be her father. Harriet Radford Dorman. On the day of your official release from the Army, we will issue a statement to the press, and you and Bethann will have to pose for the pictures with the baby and talk with the reporters again. By the time the news is out and covered nationally, I'm sure that everyone locally will be satisfied."

"I—well, I—that kind of makes it—all right, Mr. Marcus," Luther said.

"Good. Splendid, Luther." Marcus stood up and extended his hand, which Luther accepted and shook in agreement. Marcus glanced at the clock on the office wall. "Let's see now. It's just past eleven. I'll get hold of Judge Kinton and make the necessary arrangements. You're going to be at the Hall for supper around seven o'clock as we'd planned. I'm sure we can work out the necessary details by that time. I'll have the judge there no later than eight or eight-thirty. We'll schedule it for then." Marcus hesitated momentarily, then, "Oh, about Carrie, Luther. I hate to exclude her from this, but because of the necessary arrangement of dates and other details, it would probably be better for her to believe what the public will be told. Tomorrow sometime, you can go see Carrie and confess to her that you and Bethann have been married since before the war. Do you think you can make it sound convincing enough to make Carrie believe it? If you can't, maybe I could do it for you. Carrie will believe me if I tell her."

"You needn't bother, Mr. Marcus. I'll take care of Carrie. She'll believe me," he added with firm conviction in his voice. It would be impossible to make Carrie swallow this fraudulent concoction after their session yesterday, he knew, not even when served up by Mr. Marcus. He smiled to himself, thinking you'd sure be surprised if you knew how much Carrie knows about this whole thing already.

Marcus took the smile for one of complete acceptance. "Then it's all settled," he said.

"It's settled, Mr. Marcus," Luther said.

"Good, then. We'll expect you at the Hall at seven tonight."

Luther walked back to the hotel and lay down on his bed. Damn, he thought. Damn if it ain't working out all right, after all. Marcus Radford himself tells me he wants me to marry his daughter. Son-in-law to the richest man in the whole county. One of the most powerful men in the state. I sure got it made now. Married to Miss Bethann, living up there in the Hall. Cars, horses, money. Carrie a guest in the house where she used to work. I wish I could tell this to Harry Bledso. And Captain Harris. I'd sure like to tell it to somebody, by God!

He stretched, turned, and rolled luxuriously across the bed, a broad grin of satisfaction on his face. The thought of Ruth-Rachel came back to him with a clear vision of her beautiful face and seductive body. Ruth-Rachel. He knew it would never be with Bethann the way it could be with a woman like Ruth-Rachel. He just *knew* it! By comparison, Bethann was a block of ice next to the fire of Ruth-Rachel; and at this very moment, on the verge of marrying Bethann Radford, he knew he would never be faithful to her; that he must have Ruth-Rachel, would have her and keep her in some way.

Hell, he thought, Bethann didn't ask no questions when she was bedrolling with Garrett Harwick. She won't be able to point her finger at me for what I do with somebody else. No, sir. I sure got it made.

His thoughts were too stimulating to permit sleep. He got off the bed, took a fresh suit of suntans from the closet, a crisp shirt and tie, carried them downstairs to the car, and drove out to see Carrie. He would shower and shave there before going on to the Hall.

He sat across the kitchen table from Carrie, sipping at a cup of coffee. Jud was asleep in his room. Carrie was disappointed that he would not stay for supper. She had been quiet, and he knew she was anxious to hear what had taken place in his meeting with Marcus Radford, but would not come right out and ask him.

"I saw Mr. Marcus this morning," he volunteered finally.

"Did you—?"

"We talked about a lot of things, Carrie, things like what I'm going to do when I get out of the Army. Looks like I'll be out in a couple of weeks or so."

"I'm glad, Luther. What are you going to do? Did you decide?"

"I already told you one thing I'm going to do, Carrie. I told you that yesterday."

"You mean—that—? About Miss Bethann?"

He nodded with a smile. "Mr. Marcus and me talked it all over."

"You—and Mr. Marcus?" Carrie stared with open-mouthed astonishment.

"Listen, Carrie, and don't get yourself all fretted up at what I'm going to tell you. And I'm going to tell you right out plain. Mr. Marcus *wants* me to marry Miss Bethann. He wants it so he can give that baby a name, for one thing. Besides that, I'm a valuable piece of property right now, something like a prize horse or a share of stock that's on the way up. That's a sort of bargain Mr. Marcus can't afford to pass up."

"You mean he *agreed* to you marrying Miss Bethann without you telling him what you told me yesterday? What you said you told Miss Bethann?"

Luther nodded. "That's the exact size of it and I'm telling you the truth, Carrie. The God's honest truth. He asked me. I didn't ask him."

She sat with her hands clasped in her lap, staring at him as if dazed. "I don't know what to make of it," she said, "I surely don't. There's something wrong about the whole thing, something somewhere." Her head shook from side to side in puzzled doubt.

Luther grinned lightly and said, "Don't let it throw you, Carrie. I've given it a lot of hard thought, too. I figure if Mr. Marcus wants me to marry Miss Bethann, I'll marry her quick enough. Hell, she won't be marrying me for love, nor because she wants to, even—I know that—but if we get married, I'll be set for life. I can take care of you, too, and I might even be able to do something about him." He motioned toward Jud's room. "And if I don't marry her, what then? Where can I get a job around here that'll pay anything decent, unless I go back to driving a truck for Tam Nariocas? And I know you don't want that. This way Marcus Radford gets what he wants and I get what I want. Can't you see that, Carrie? It's as much a business deal for him as it is for me. Everybody gets what he wants and nobody gets hurt."

"Luther, don't talk like that," Carrie pleaded, the tears beginning to fall as she spoke. She wiped at them with the back of her hand. "You—you sound—almost like him—when you start talking like that. Like the lowest kind of white trash in the world."

"All right then, you tell me: what kind of white trash are we? Middle-class white trash?"

"Luther!" she burst out angrily. "What's come over you, anyway? Don't you even know right from wrong any more? Just when it was beginning to look like things would be different, looking up for us for once in our lives, you start talking and acting like—like—I don't even know what."

"Looking up for us, Carrie? How?" Luther snapped back waspishly.

Carrie was shaking her head, the pain visible in her eyes. "I don't know exactly, but somehow it's not *right*, Luther! It's just not right, and you marrying Miss Bethann won't make it any righter. You come home thinking you've got to have so much more than you had before, and you don't even care what you do to get it. You don't even know what you're doing to get it."

"Carrie," he said with exaggerated patience, "I know *exactly* what I'm doing and I know what I'm marrying and why. I know it won't be like the princess in the fairy tale who marries the beggar boy for love, and I don't even give a damn. That ain't important any more." He got up and went to the sink and turned on the cold water tap, allowing the water to run over his wrists. "Where you got the whiskey hidden?" he asked. "All this talkin's made me thirsty. I need a drink."

She got up from the table silently and went out toward her room. Luther shut off the tap and dried his wrists with the kitchen towel, picked up two glasses off the drainboard and brought them to the table. When she returned with the bottle, he pulled the cork and poured two drinks. Carrie raised her glass to him without a smile. "Here's to your—marriage," she said solemnly. "I sure hope you get some happiness out of it, but you don't seem to think that's necessary or important any more."

"Thanks," Luther replied, "and don't you worry about that part of it. I'll be happy. I know it." He drank with her, watched as she toyed with the empty glass. "You got no cause to be crying for me, Carrie," he said more kindly.

"Maybe it's not for you that I'm crying this time. Maybe it's for Miss Bethann. Oh, Luther, you've got no call to be doing a thing like this, not even if Mr. Marcus begged you to. Not to people who've been so good to us all these years when—he—couldn't provide for us."

Luther had poured another drink for himself and gulped it down. Now he pulled the knot of his tie down and opened the top button of his shirt. "Sure. Sure. Mr. Marcus." The name seemed to raise a new anger in him, tying his thoughts into the conversation he had

heard the night when Harris was telling Bledso of his suspicions concerning Marcus and Carrie. "Sure," he said, "it's always Mr. Marcus you're thinking about. Why, Carrie? How come you're so much more concerned about him than me? Because he let you work as a servant to help out his niggers at the Hall? Because he sent us money after Pa fell off his roof and couldn't work any more? Because he fixed this house up, made it bigger and had it painted and all? And because he dressed you up like a fine lady with new dresses and fancy underclothes and shoes and stockings and other things? Did he do all those things because of me, Carrie, or was it—because—because—?"

The unfairness of his unspoken charge caught Carrie by surprise, as though he had struck her with his fist. She gasped at the suddenness of his attack, stared at him as he leaned forward, unable to finish his accusation. Her hand closed over the glass tightly, as if she meant to draw her arm back and hurl it at him. Then she went limp.

"All right, Luther," she said with deadly calm. "You go ahead and do what you please, what you think you've got to do. You just told me what you think of me and I say you've gone crazy. Crazy to believe it and crazy to do what you say you're going to do. The medal may have given you a lot of importance to a lot of people, but it didn't give you any more brains than a peachick, and you trying to stand up beside Mr. Marcus makes no more sense than you trying to kill a crocodile with a beanshooter."

Luther sat back in his chair, looking down at his feet, contrite, ashamed of an accusation someone else had put into his mind, feeling for certain now as he watched Carrie that the charge was a false one, that there was nothing between his sister and Mr. Marcus. Silently, he cursed Harris for having spoken so to Bledso, cursed himself for repeating it.

Carrie poured the drinks this time, raised her glass again and said, "Here's to my big hero brother," with full scorn as she began to drink it down. Luther drank his quietly, poured another for himself and sipped at it. "A lot you know about it," he said angrily. "A lot you know about anything, big sister or no. You want to know the truth, the whole truth, I'll tell you about it."

His voice was thick and harsh with the whiskey he had drunk, and now as he poured still another one for himself, some of the colorless liquid spilled over onto the table and began to drip to the floor. He lifted the glass and swallowed the drink, put the glass down again. "Listen, Carrie," he said, "all this—this swill you been

hearing and reading about me? I guess you believe it all and that's why you're thinkin' I might even be getting the short end of the deal if I marry Miss Bethann. Well, you just listen to what she'll be getting."

Carrie studied him with wavering eyes, frowning to hear him more clearly

"You think she's gettin' so much, don't you? Well, Carrie, you listen real good. I ain't no herol I'm telling you the God's honest truth, Carrie, *I ain't no herol*! The whole thing was a big accident except for me gettin' shot in the chest an' twice in my leg. No, even that's a damn lie. It wasn't no accident. I done that part of it myself. No Germans. Nobody else. Me."

Carrie sat up straighter in her chair, shocked by his self-accusation, staring unbelievably at him. "That's right, Carrie. Your hero brother, Luther Dorman, who you been reading all about, was just another rear rank private who was out on his first patrol with a bunch of guys, any one of which was worth a barrellful of Luther Dormans when it came to soldierin'. In the Army for over three years an' out on my first an' only patrol."

He paused for a breath, saw Carrie's eyes fixed on his face, disbelief written all over her. "I'n lying to you, Carrie. This is the truth an' nothin' but the truth I'm tellin' you. Besides me, you're the on'iest one in the world who knows it now, but I got to tell somebody. It's gettin' too damn heavy to carry aroun' by myself, tryin' to live with it all day long, sleep with it every night."

He poured another drink for himself, sloshing it around in the glass, raising it to his lips, and drinking it down before he continued. "Not only was I not a hero, Carrie, but I only killed one man in the whole war. One man. And that man, that man, Carrie, he was an American soldier. That's right. That's the saddest part about the whole thing. An American soldier was the on'iest man I ever killed. An' you know who that soldier was, Carrie? He—he was—my own—patrol leader." He looked at her and saw the horror creep into her eyes as though she had already known what he was going to tell her. "Tha's right, Carrie. Tha's exactly right. Tech Sergeant Dale Hagen. Lutie Hagen's son. Ruth-Rachel Hagen's husband, the poor, sad son-of-a-bitch!"

"Oh, *no!* No, Luther! You don't mean that! You *couldn't!* I don't believe it! You're *drunk!*" she cried out.

"Sure. Sure, I'm drunk, else I'd never tell even you. But you c'n b'lieve it, Carrie," he said dully, sadly. "Every single, living word of it." The words came slowly, sorrowfully from the full depth of

the remorse and guilt and torture he felt. And now he knew he could not stop, must tell her the whole story. He looked away from her, turned unsteadily in his chair so that he would not be facing her. His voice was low, the earlier anger and fire going out of it as he began to speak again.

"I might as well tell you the rest of it. I didn't know it was Dale. That part of it was the accident. When I saw I'd killed the only other man left out of that whole patrol, I didn't know what to do. I like to went out of my head for killing the only real friend I ever had. Not only that, but what I had staring me in the face was even worse. I'd have to answer for the whole thing, tell what I knew about what happened to that patrol. And I knew I wouldn't be able to answer even one of the questions they'd throw at me.

"Questions like: *If everybody else got killed, how does it happen, Private Dorman, that you don't even have as much as a scratch on you? Not even a mark?* I could even see Captain Wentworth's face asking me: *Where the hell were you all the time your buddies were gettin' killed, Private?* I could even see the general, signin' the court-martial papers. So—well, Carrie, then I went and did it. I took a pistol off one of the dead Germans and shot myself, tryin' to put a quick end to it. And when that didn't kill me right away, I tried once more, but I couldn't pick the pistol up again and the next two shots went into my leg. I figured, hell, with twelve guys dead already, what am I waitin' for? What right I got to go back alive? That's why I put that hole in my chest, hopin' it would go through my heart. But I wasn't even good enough to do the right kind of a job at that. All I did was nick my left lung. Then those two other shots. When they found me, it was just my tough luck that I wasn't dead. My lousy, rotten luck was that they found me alive an' kept me alive so that I could become a great big hero!"

He caught the change in Carrie's voice, filled with pity and understanding for him, crying out, "Oh, Luther! Poor Luther!" and he got up and stumbled toward her, falling to his knees, his face buried in her lap as his arms reached around her waist. Carrie brushed his hair with one hand, trying to let him know that she understood.

"Sh-h-h, Luther," she soothed gently, just as she had so many years ago when he would take a fall and run to her crying in this same way. "Don't cry, Luther. All the time you were talking, I could see how it could happen that way. A big mistake was made, the kind that had to keep going on and on and on. You can't rub that part of it away now. Nobody would let you after all the fuss that's been made. And it wouldn't do anybody any good even if you told

the papers about it. It wouldn't bring Dale or the others back, would it?"

"Carrie," he sobbed brokenly, "I didn' mean to do any of it, so help me God. Killin' Dale was an accident, a pure accident. When I woke up back at the CP later on, it was too late. I tried to open my mouth an' talk, but the words wouldn't come out. By that time the doctor gave me something to put me back to sleep so they could fly me out."

Carrie said, "Luther, you go and lie down. I guess this had to come out of you sometime and I'm glad it was to me. You're going to have to decide for yourself what you're going to do from now on, and I'm not going to say another word about it. I promise you."

"Do from now on? I'm going to do what I told Mr. Marcus I'd do."

"What do you mean?"

"Carrie, Mr. Marcus an' me, we came to an agreement this morning."

"What agreement are you talking about, Luther?"

"Tonight. At the Hall. Miss Bethann an' me, we're gettin' married."

"Tonight? You—you and—Miss Bethann?" Carrie asked incredulously.

He nodded. "I couldn't get out of it now if I wanted to, Carrie. I told Mr. Marcus. I gave him my word. Now I don't know—I wish to God I hadn't started up with it. But I can't back down now. It's done."

5.

Monday. Seven P.M.

Luther, shaved and dressed in fresh suntans, drove directly to the Hall, wheeled into the back driveway and started for the rear entrance to the house, then remembered that he was a dinner guest and would be expected to arrive by the front door. He started the motor again, backed it to the curve, and now made a left turn to bring him in front of the house. As he got out and started up the steps, Newton, dressed in his neat black suit with black bowtie and pencil-striped vest with silver buttons, threw the large double doors wide open in welcome.

"Good evenin', Mist' Luthuh," he said grinning broadly, and as Luther crossed the threshold, added, "Yo' is expected."

"Thanks, Newton," Luther acknowledged formally. This was his first visit to the Hall as the invited guest of its master and here, in the resplendency of the rich setting, sober doubt began to assail him. When Newton showed him into the large, formal sitting room,

with its delicate chairs and sofas, its cabinets of fragile bric-a-brac, paintings, and exquisite figurines on the carved mantel over the fireplace, he walked hesitantly, uncomfortable, hands gripping the uniform cap he refused to surrender to Newton as though he might suddenly be asked to leave.

"You sit right heah," Newton said, sensing Luther's uneasiness. "Mist' Marcus, he be right down."

Even Marcus Radford's bluff, hearty greeting failed to put him completely at ease in this room. Marcus showed him across the hall into the more comfortable, less formal setting of his private study, where the book-lined walls, rich leather chairs, and embossed, leather-topped desk clearly indicated a room designed for a man in which to relax, live, and enjoy—a room in which to read or work, drink, or entertain other men. They sat here and drank good bourbon while Marcus chatted in his deep, resonant voice. Luther smiled or nodded or frowned as the subject matter of the conversation indicated, growing more at ease with the drink in him. He said little, but his eyes were assessing his surroundings, approving what he saw, wondering not so much at their worth but how he would fit into such rooms as these, and those above this floor that he hadn't seen since he was a child when he was brought here by Carrie to play with Bethann. Which would they share—?

"Dinnuh is served, suh," Newton's quiet voice announced with precise dignity.

Bethann had seated herself as they entered the dining room and took their places, Newton holding a chair for Luther. She looked up and said simply, "Hello, Luther," but there was no warmth or smile or welcome in her voice, speaking to him with less feeling than she would have addressed a casual acquaintance or a servant; even a horse or a dog, he thought gravely.

"Good evening, Miss Bethann," Luther replied, and then the chair was pushed under him and he sat down.

Now he saw, for the first time since his visit to the Holliman home in Boston, a gentleman's table set with richly embroidered linens, fine and rare china, exquisite crystal, the heavy silver service—far richer than even that enjoyed by the Hollimans. Still unsure of himself, he watched Marcus and Miss Bethann carefully as they received the various dishes from Newton, followed them as they chose this spoon, that fork or knife. He was sure he had made no mistakes and took some satisfaction in this knowledge.

Marcus led the conversation; in fact, monopolized it. And finally, when he seemed to have run out of local news, he began framing

questions that would require Luther to speak up—questions about various European countries he had visited, the destruction he had seen, Army life in general, his return by special plane to the United States, the ceremonies at the White House, and the bond tour.

As the wineglasses were emptied and refilled, Luther found his voice, remembering, as Harris had patiently taught him, to be cautious and modest in any reference to himself, his conduct or behavior, to be sure to throw the credit and praise upon his comrades as recklessly as he wished. "Praise the men who were with you, Luther," he had said, "and you will be regarded as a most modest and deserving man; at the same time you will be automatically included with them by your listeners, all at no expense to your own personal humility." Luther had learned that this was as true in practice as it had been in theory. When he spoke of Dale Hagen's bravery, or that of Henry Luftin or Sergeant Rupertus and the others, told of their heroic deeds, his own unspoken achievements were made the greater by virtue of the Medal of Honor he wore. And so now he spoke modestly, almost humbly, to Marcus in answer to his questions, his eyes turned occasionally toward Bethann, who looked down at her plate or over his head, to this side or that, never directly at him, never at Marcus, like a caged bird seeking an avenue of escape.

She sat straight, regally, like a painting he had seen in a museum in Naples of a young queen out of another age and time—young, beautiful, the hauteur of birth and position self-evident, the imperious stare of her youthful eyes. Bethann's mouth did not smile, nor did she speak. She ate slowly and quietly as though waiting only for this scene to be over with, for the next ordeal to come. Her hair was combed upward from the back of her neck, plaited into a ring atop her head where it formed a golden corona. Her white dress was plain, light and summery, her skin tones exquisitely golden to match her hair. Yet, try as he might, Luther could not identify this handsome young woman with the girl with whom he had shared a night in a small cabin; and he wondered if she, too, at this moment, might be remembering that same night.

The war conversation ended and Marcus turned to more personal matters.

"And your father, Luther?"

"Pa? Oh, he's all right, I guess. I didn't have too much time with him. He's feeling poorly and was mostly in bed."

Marcus nodded sympathetically. "Too bad. Too bad. Well, perhaps he'll pick up some now that you're home."

"Maybe." Now Luther recalled the name of Bethann's horse, the pretty, star-marked palomino with four white-stockinged feet. "How is Shahzadi, Miss Bethann?" he asked, directing his first question to her. Hearing her name, she looked up with somnambulistic eyes, her face completely immobile, her air detached, as if she were carved in marble.

"What? I'm sorry, Luther. I didn't hear you."

Marcus said, "Shahzadi. Luther asked you about Shahzadi."

"Shahzadi?" A small puzzled frown appeared over her eyes.

Luther said, "Shahzadi. That pretty little palomino you used to jump."

"Oh. You mean Princess." The frown disappeared with her recognition of the name. "I don't know, Luther," she said with complete disinterest. "I don't ride any more." She looked away from him again.

"Too bad, Miss Bethann. You always were such a—"

She rose abruptly, cutting into his words as she dropped her napkin beside her plate. "I know you'll excuse me," she said. "I have a few things to do."

"Sure. Sure, Miss Bethann," Luther replied hastily, rising to his feet.

Marcus stood up slowly, glanced sharply at his watch. It was a few minutes before eight. "Eight-thirty," he said, addressing Bethann. "In my study, dear."

Without turning back to look at him, she replied dully, "I'll be there."

As she went out of the room toward the stairs, the door knocker sounded and Newton started for the front of the house. "If that's Judge Kinton and Mr. Hedge, show them in here, Newton," Marcus called after him.

6.

The ceremony in the study was probably the shortest and coldest in the memory of any of the seven persons present. Six, if Luther could be discounted, since he had never attended a wedding before. Bethann, Sudie, Newton, Marcus Radford, Judge Kinton, and the city clerk, Elbert Hedge. And Luther. This was the bridal party, and of those present, Sudie and Newton, next to Marcus, had known the bride longer than anyone else and now showed the deepest concern for her.

All present, participants and witnesses alike, understood this was to be a marriage of convenience, for the falsified new record. Cer-

tainly Mr. Hedge and Judge Kinton, who had drawn up and signed the back-dated documents, were aware of the extraordinary circumstances—particularly Mr. Hedge, who in the privacy of his own office had gone over the 1941 records book until he found a suitable place to inscribe the marriage-license data issued to Luther Dorman and Bethann Radford.

When the documents had been examined by Marcus and Luther, Newton and Sudie were called in and Sudie sent to fetch Miss Bethann from her room. She came in silently, dressed as she had been at dinner. She took the place indicated for her beside Luther and then Judge Kinton began to read swiftly from a small book he took from his inside breast pocket. In no more than two minutes the necessary words had been uttered, questions asked, answers given, and the ring, supplied by Marcus as the ceremony began—and to which Luther had given no thought—placed upon Bethann's finger. It was over. Bethann turned and walked out of the room, her face white and cold, followed by a Sudie who was wiping at her tear-stained face with an edge of her small white apron. There was no bridal kiss. Newton followed Sudie out of the study, and the four white men stood together, embarrassed, uncertain, silent. Hedge and Kinton accepted cigars from Marcus as Luther lighted a cigarette.

Marcus said briskly, "Hedge, you're certain about this now. Nobody can—"

"Mr. Radford," the sharp-featured clerk replied in oily tones, "I can assure you of that. Gardner Field, who was the licensing clerk in 1941, died in 1944. The record is in his handwriting—" he smirked in silent tribute to his own skillful handicraft—"and with my attesting signature and Judge Kinton's, there it is, legal as it can possibly be for anyone to see. Here's the baby's birth certificate in the name of Harriet Radford Dorman."

Marcus ushered the two men out into the hallway where he spoke to them in private for several minutes, then returned to the study. Luther was seated in one of the two leather guest chairs, one knee over the other, smoking one of Marcus's long cigars he had taken from the humidor. Not his usual cigarette, Marcus noticed, and this seemed to annoy the master of the Hall. He stood looking down upon Luther with some mild distaste as Luther stared coolly up at his father-in-law.

"Well, Luther," Marcus said for lack of other words, "I guess that does it."

"I guess it does—uh— What do I call you now?" Luther asked

with a smile. "Man don't call his father-in-law 'Mister.' Do I call you 'Pa' or—well, he don't call him by his first name either, does he?"

Marcus cleared his throat, further annoyed with this inane question that sought for a more intimate relationship between them. "For the present, Luther, suppose you just call me 'Dad.' Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got some work to do here. I suppose you'll be wanting to go—up and talk to—ah—to Bethann."

Thus dismissed, Luther got up. The cigar had been smoked down less than a half inch. He looked at Marcus now, then deliberately stubbed out the cigar in the ashtray on the desk, breaking its end in crushing movements. Marcus observed this action coldly. Luther smiled, let the broken cigar fall into the tray, then walked out of the study into the hall. When the door closed behind him, Marcus stared at the crushed cigar for a moment, picked up the ashtray that held it, and dropped its contents into the wastepaper basket. He replaced the ashtray, and as he stood there, he raised his foot and kicked hard at an open lower drawer of the desk, slamming it shut noisily, feeling a furious anger within himself.

In the upper hallway of the house Luther stood looking about him, bewildered by the closed doors, four on each side, searching for the one behind which he would find his recent bride. He walked the entire length of the hall, paused momentarily outside each of the eight doors, listened, but he could detect no sounds that would indicate occupancy. Perplexed, he put out a wavering hand and touched a knob, but before he could grip it firmly, withdrew in doubt. He made the tour again, treading lightly upon the thick, soft carpeting, hesitating before each door, slight beads of perspiration forming on his forehead to testify to his bafflement.

Guessing blindly, he chose the second door on the left side and grasped the knob in his hand, and just as he touched it another door opened, the one next to this one, and Sudie came out of it. She looked in his direction and started to turn away toward the back stairway, then stopped, turned back to him and said, "That one is th' baby's room. Miss Bethann, she in dis one." She turned and, without another word, left him alone in the hallway. Luther walked to the door indicated as Bethann's, put his hand boldly on the knob, held it there for a few seconds as he looked down over his uniform, much as he would have done in an Army camp to see if his shoes were properly shined, trousers pressed, and tie tucked

in between the proper buttons of his shirt before going on pass. All was in order. He pushed the door forward and stepped inside the room.

Bethann was seated before her dressing table running a comb through her hair. She saw him in the mirror standing at the door and stopped the combing motion and reached for the light robe beside her, then stopped, smiled to herself, and sat still, watching his obvious confusion in the mirror. She had changed from the white dress into a light blue skirt and wore only a bra on her upper body. Luther stood stock still, dry-lipped, his tongue reaching out to moisten the corner of his mouth, waiting for some word, making no move to approach her. Bethann picked up the comb again, ran it through her rich hair, then put it down and stood up, turned toward him for a moment, knowing with certainty the picture she presented for him, watching the strain of dilemma on his face. She turned toward the bed and walked the few steps to it and picked up a white blouse and put it on, buttoned it slowly, then pushed its bottom edges down into the skirt band. Now she stepped into a pair of slippers and walked to the built-in closet-wardrobe, took a lightweight blue sleeveless sweater out of a drawer, and held it dangling loosely from her hand. Then she turned toward him and said coolly, unsmilingly, "Just what do you think you're doing in here, Luther?"

He took two halting steps forward, stopped awkwardly, and said, "I—I—she told me—that this was—uh—Mrs. Dorman's room."

Bethann's face clouded with annoyance. "Don't you ever use that name to me again," she said shortly.

This display of ire in her voice seemed to strengthen his own. "You can't deny it now, Miss Bethann," he said. "It's your name the same as it is mine and I got five witnesses to prove it. Including your own daddy."

She said, "Not even you are foolish enough to think that five witnesses or fifty are going to make any difference to me. You're still nothing more than a—the tenant boy next door." She paused for a moment, then said, "Tonight, Luther, you were a convenience to my father and only an annoyance to me. You'll be paid for your trouble, I'm sure, but you'll have to collect from Mr. Marcus Audrey Radford and not from me."

He said with some heaviness, "I—uh—I thought—I was—" then stopped.

"You actually thought you were going to live out your part of this marriage farce in this room with me?" She laughed with genuine

amusement at her own words. "No, Luther, I think not." She turned serious again. "You took an unfair advantage of a situation one night a long time ago when I—wasn't—myself. And now you want to collect your blackmail. And you probably will; but not from me."

He stood still in the middle of the room, staring at her as she put the sweater around her shoulders, again turning back to the mirror to check her appearance, giving a light nod of approval to the image she saw looking back at her. When she turned back to him, the sight of his confusion made her smile again. "Did you really expect to stay here with me, Luther? Why, you didn't even bring a pair of pajamas with you, did you? Not even a toothbrush."

"I didn't—bring—any—thing," he stammered haltingly.

"Just as though you'd started out to go to a movie or meet some friend at the poolroom, and then suddenly decided you'd get married instead," she taunted mildly.

Anger began to replace his awe of her. "How come you're so particular now?" he asked. "I didn't need any pajamas or a toothbrush the last time."

She said slowly, "No, you didn't, did you, Luther? It was like finding a girl waiting for you in a barn somewhere, one of those colored girls who are always around somewhere handy for a white boy to find."

Again the tip of his tongue flicked out to wet his dry lips. "Sure." He smiled now, eager to match her own tone. "I guess that's just exactly how it was. Like one of the gals who always knows when you go down to the creek to take a bath or a swim and lets you find her there accidental-like. Sure. In the dark it could have been just like that," he added, "you or a colored gal. It didn't make much difference."

She studied him coldly. "That's fine. Then it won't upset you that you weren't the first, will it? And that this should put an end to the absurd suggestion that you are Harriet's father."

"Sure, I know it now, Miss Bethann. And I'm not so sure I was the last, either. But I won't let that worry me none. Not any more than it will worry you that you weren't my first. Or," he added, "that you won't be my last."

She spoke now in a more matter-of-fact vein. "All right, Luther, suppose we just let it stay that way between us. Sudie is fixing a room for you on the opposite side of the hall, at the back of the house. It's nice and big and has its own bathroom. It was one of the guest rooms and should be roomy enough. Even for you."

Luther glanced around the room carelessly, with an air of amusement. "I still don't see nothing wrong with this one," he said.

"There isn't a thing in the world wrong with this one. And that's the way it's going to remain. This is my room and it's going to stay my room and this is probably the last time you'll ever put a foot inside it. From now on, Sergeant Dorman, this room and the one next to it, Harriet's, are, to put it in Army terms so you can understand more easily, off limits to you at all times. And please remember one thing: any bargains you made were made with my father and not me. So if at any time you become unhappy with your sleeping arrangements or feel lonesome at night, you might try sleeping with him. His room is the big one on the right as you come to the top of the stairs."

"Thanks, I'll try to remember that."

"And just in case you forget, my door will be locked from now on." She started toward the door.

"Where are you going now?" he asked.

She turned at the door and replied airily, "Oh. I didn't tell you, did I? I made a date the other day with a friend. That was before I found out I was going to be married tonight, and since I hate to break a date without having a good reason for doing so, I'm going to keep it."

"Now that's right considerate of you and I know your friend is going to appreciate your being so thoughtful, keeping a date with him on the same night you got married to another man."

"I'm counting on his appreciation, Luther," she retorted. "Also, so he will know that, even though I'm married to Regis's greatest hero, it won't be an inconvenience to either himself or me; that it won't stop or change anything."

He stared at her with a sense of helplessness, then walked closer until he was less than a foot away from her, and for a moment she thought he might even strike her, yet she stood her ground, chin raised, jaws clamped together, waiting. Abruptly, he turned away from her and walked to the wide bed, lay down upon it, put the heels of his heavy combat boots on the white cover, and crossed his hands behind his head.

"Go ahead, Mrs. Dorman," he said amiably. "You go ahead and spend your honeymoon with who the hell ever you want. But just you remember this: Every dog has his day, and that includes the bitches as well as the he-dogs, the alley dogs and the thorough-breds."

She pulled the door open and said, "I'm glad you said that,

Luther. Until now I thought I felt a little sorry for you, but now I've no more feeling for you than I would for a chicken hawk. You may be a hero in the eyes of the whole United States of America, but I think you know how little you will ever mean in this house." She went out, leaving the door open.

8.

She was gone and Luther lay back upon the pillow just as he had lain there to show her an indifference he hadn't felt. Inability to cope with her obvious loathing for him cloaked him with impotent frustration. In the silence of the night he heard the motor of her convertible roar, the squeal of its tires as she raced out of the driveway and turned into the highway. Where would she be going, he wondered. To whom? Who would hold her in his arms and console her on her wedding night?

He got off the bed and straightened the cover, found he was unable to brush away the marks of brown boot polish that had rubbed off on it. He went across the hall and toward the back to the room she had told him would be his. The door was open now, no doubt an act of Sudie's to identify it for him. He flicked the light on and, as she had said, it was roomy, and with all the coldness and anonymity of a guest room, like one of the many hotel rooms he had occupied over the last weeks, with nothing personal to identify it as belonging to anyone in the whole world.

He thought of his own few possessions at the hotel, all of which were contained in two leather suitcases and one canvas Air Corps flight bag, wondering how this pitiful handful of clothes would fit into two such spacious closets. It struck him then that he had no civilian clothes at all, that the worn things he had left behind him would no longer fit him any more than they would fit this atmosphere. Would he have to spend the remainder of his money to outfit himself for civilian life, he wondered, or would he simply walk into Markland's or Barnett's or Siegel's and casually order what he needed and have the bill charged to his father-in-law? Marcus might even set up accounts in his own name and let the bills be sent to him for payment. He didn't know about these things; in this, as well as other matters of the future, he would bide his time and see what happened before he made any moves.

Now Bethann's caustic, angry words came back to him, and he knew, of course, that they would never live together as husband and wife; and somehow, strangely enough, this was something that had never occurred to him. He had envisioned that they would be to-

gether, but in his idyllic dreams he had never visualized how it would be between them in the very beginning—only after time had elapsed and they had accepted each other; now he smiled wryly with the knowledge that he had been naïve to imagine that this would be so, she having gone into the marriage with him only to satisfy his threat to cause her much trouble. He realized now that this had no doubt all been discussed fully between Marcus and Bethann, and with Marcus's full approval, for had Marcus not been willing for the marriage to take place, there would have been none, not even if it meant that Luther's body would be found floating in the river or, as in the case of Garrett Harwick, thrown into the street in front of County General.

She was right, he knew. He had made his bargain with Marcus Radford and not with her. He heard her words again: *If you feel lonesome at night, you might try sleeping with him.*

Suddenly he thought of Carrie and knew without question that she, too, had been right. His lips tightened and he punched a fist into his open hand. All right! *All right!* he said to himself angrily. *What else could I have done?*

Without looking farther, without touching anything in the room, he went out and closed the door softly. He walked down the wide, long hallway, stopped to listen at the door he knew now was Harriet's. For a moment he debated whether he should go in and take his first glimpse at Harriet Radford Dorman who was not his daughter, and this was canceled when he saw a shadow coming up the steps, backlighted by the huge chandelier that hung over the downstairs hall area from the second-floor ceiling. He watched as the shadow drew closer, and when it reached the top level, he saw it was Sudie—Sudie, looking at him in cold, silent arrogance as he stood before the door to Harriet's room. She shuffled toward him at a slightly faster pace now, and as her hand reached for the doorknob, his own hand released it to her.

"You done made a mistake," she said. "I tole you before dis here's th' baby's room. Yo' room—" she pointed down the hall to the guest room he had pre-empted only a few moments ago—"is down theah. Miss Bethann, she don' like f'nobody—*nobody!*—to be comin' in heah to distu'b the baby. Not even Mist' Marcus."

He knew it would be useless to reply and so did not bother. Already, any sign of the earlier friendliness for him had gone out of Sudie, and he knew it would be the same with Newton. So soon had he become alien to this household, to be held in cold contempt by its servants. Without a word he walked away from her disap-

proving stare toward the steps and went below. He passed the closed door to the study and veered away from it toward the back of the house. In the butler's pantry Newton was putting away the last of the silver. When Luther walked in, the old Negro looked up wordlessly with the same disdainful, pained expression Luther had seen in Sudie's eyes. *Sure*, Luther thought, *that's the way it's going to be around here*. Had he been accepted, Newton would have beamed his big smile and asked if there was something he could get for him, do for him to make him feel at home; but this was not his home and nothing could make it so, not even his marriage to Miss Bethann. This was sheer, unslaked coldness and scorn. Nothing. The previous warmth of early evening was as dead as the ashes of a three-day-old campfire.

"Where do—uh—we—keep the—liquor around here, Newton?" Luther asked.

Newton continued to stare, and the silent contempt Luther saw in the old Negro's eyes infuriated him. This wasn't Mr. Marcus or Miss Bethann before him. This was a black servant. "You listen to me when I talk to you, nigger," he lashed out angrily. "Where's the liquor kept around here?"

Newton turned away without a word and reached beneath the striped apron and drew out a ring of keys, selected one, went to one of the cabinets and unlocked it, pulled the door open for Luther's inspection. Still, he uttered no word. Luther stared at Newton, saw the hurt written on his face, feeling the shame of his words; yet he was unable to say anything to the old man to assuage his damaged feelings. He bent over and picked out a fresh, unopened bottle of bourbon and nodded approvingly. He bent again and took another, then turned on his heel and walked out into the center hallway, opened the front door, and stepped into the night air.

He walked down the steps to the car—his car now? he wondered—and got into it. He tore at the foil and twisted the cap off one of the bottles, took a deep pull at it, replaced the cap, nodded with mute satisfaction in appreciation of its smoothness. This was the beginning.

He pulled out of the driveway into the main road, speeding along toward the Dorman cottage, but the events of the past three hours were too recent and unpleasant for him to want to recount them to Carrie, knowing he would not be able to hide his true feelings and disappointment from her. He increased speed and shot past the turnoff and continued west along County Road, willing

Ruth-Rachel back into his mind in order to drive Bethann out of it. Within moments he was approaching the lane that led to the Hagen cottage. He applied the brakes and heard the tires whine in protest as he turned into the narrow side road. At decreased speed he pulled up in front of the darkened house, wondering if he would find her here.

He waited for a few seconds before he got out of the car and started slowly toward the steps; and then he saw her as she got up off the porch swing and came toward him.

"Who's there?" he heard the challenge. .

"It's me, Ruth-Rachel. Luther," he replied softly

He mounted the top step and she came into his arms, close, pressing hard against him. Without hesitation he kissed her and she returned the kiss, her arms around his neck, fondling it gently with her hands.

"Where's Lutie?" he asked.

"In her room. She's been drinking ever since supper. Drinking and cursing me and hailing the Lord, her favorite pastimes. You came in for part of it, too. She's out cold right now. Be like that for hours. We don't have to worry about her. Come and sit awhile."

"Not here," he said hoarsely. "Let's get away from here."

"Where to?" she asked agreeably.

"Any place. Just not here. This place gives me the creeps."

"Because of her?"

He shrugged. "Maybe."

"Or because of Dale?" she asked clairvoyantly, then realized she had been less than wise. He put his hands up, took her wrists, and pulled them away from his neck.

"You want to get out of here with me or stay here? If you stay, you stay with her."

"All right, Luther," she acquiesced quickly. "I wasn't serious. I was only teasing. Let's go."

They got into the car and he drove west and south toward the river. Luther began to feel better now, the tightness in his throat and chest eased considerably. Ruth-Rachel moved across the seat to be closer to him, and the feel of her beside him, her arm linked with his, and the perfume of the night and the stars were slowly removing his earlier desperation, replaced it with an increased exhilaration. He went off the paved upper road downward along the hard-packed dirt lower road that led to the river's edge. He parked, as if undecided in which direction to turn.

"Where to now?" Ruth-Rachel asked.

"There's some fishing cabins down here along the river. We'll try one of them."

They turned south and cruised slowly along the dirt road behind the shacks and cabins that lined the east bank of the river. Here and there an occasional cabin showed a light, warning them of its occupancy. They passed half a dozen empty ones, then came to a large cottage that looked as though it had had a lot of care shown it: painted, raked grounds, fenced, two rowboats pulled up on the higher ground. A twenty-foot cabin cruiser lay in the river about twenty-five feet out, swinging lazily from its anchor chain, moored to a buoy. Luther pulled in closer to the fence and parked in the rear of it.

Ruth-Rachel got out of the car, swirling around happily to express her release. "Oh, Luther," she cried out happily, "I feel so *free* away from that house, here with you. You don't know what it's been like, living with her. A prison. I feel as though I'd just broken out for the first time in years."

She whirled around again, this time ending in his arms, and he held and caressed her firmly, bracing himself against her frantic grip on him. "Hey!" he panted. "Let's hold on a bit, else it'll all be over even before it gets started. Come on. Let's go inside and do some investigating."

He lifted her over the low gate, put her down easily, and leaped over it in one jump. They went up the steps to the back porch, tried the door, found it locked. Luther walked the length of the porch, trying each window, but found none open. He went back to the car and opened the trunk and took out a flat tire iron. He wedged one end of the iron between a window and the sill, tested the leverage, and felt the center lock move slightly. He levered it upward in one quick motion and the lock snapped easily. He raised the window from the bottom and motioned to Ruth-Rachel to climb into the room. After a quick look-around, he returned to the car and got the two bottles of bourbon, passed them in to Ruth-Rachel, and climbed inside.

The room was the kitchen. Beyond it was a big, open living room. He found a candle in a holder and lit it for a better look around, shielding its light with one hand. In one corner was a table with six chairs placed around it. There was a fireplace, two sofas and several lounge chairs, scatter rugs on the random-width pine board floor. There were two bedrooms off to one side of the living room, and Luther and Ruth-Rachel went into the larger of the two.

"We'd better not turn any of the big lights on, just in case," said Luther.

"What do we need with big lights?" Ruth-Rachel replied. "Anything we need to find we can find in the dark, can't we?"

Luther laughed. "You're sure right, honey. I'll go see if I can find a couple of glasses in the kitchen."

He put the candle down and went in search of the glasses, found them in one of the cupboards. When he returned, she was lying on the bed. Luther clinked the two glasses together, then poured bourbon into them. He drank his quickly, then blew the candle out and began to disrobe. Ruth-Rachel got up and took her drink, swallowed it, then stepped out of the shaft of moonlight, and he could hear the rustle of her clothes as she undressed. Luther picked up his glass again, then saw her as she stepped back into the moonlight, and he stood breathing hard in open-mouthed wonderment at the sensuality of her, his lips dry with the thought of the pleasure that awaited him. Ruth-Rachel went to him and he reached out for her, clutching her hard.

"Ruth-Rachel, honey, honey," he whispered.

"Let's get back to the bed," she urged.

"Not yet. Not yet. Let me hold you like this for a minute."

They held each other tightly, and then slowly she began to move backward to the bed. When she felt the edge of it against the backs of her knees, she lowered herself upon it and he upon her and now their eagerness and hunger for each other asserted itself.

He lay back in the bed, surfeit for the moment and happy. In the moonlight that came across the bed, he could make out Ruth-Rachel's naked form as she lay close to him, one leg thrown across him, her long hair tossed loosely on the pillow, part of it covering his chest. He shook her shoulder. "Hey!" he called gently

"Hm-m?"

"How about a drink? Where are the glasses?"

"Reach over on your side of the bed. They're on the floor where you put them."

He reached for the glasses, found the bottle instead, and pulled the cap off, drinking from its neck, then passed it to her. "Onliest way to drink in bed," he said. "You want to drink from a glass you got to sit up. It's more comfortable this way."

"It suits me," Ruth-Rachel said, taking the bottle from him, tilting it up to her mouth and drinking in the same manner.

"Man," Luther sighed, "that was good. Real good."

She handed the bottle back to him. "Have some more, then," she said.

"I didn't mean the whiskey. There's plenty more where that came

from. You, Ruth-Rachel. You. You're the best. Anywhere in the world. The best, the greatest, the most."

She laughed lightly, pleased. "I told you you wouldn't be sorry, didn't I?"

"You did for a fact. And I mean what I said, you're the greatest. In the Army you hear all kinds of men talking about all kinds of women—the best, the worst, the ones think they know all about it and the ones you can tell right off don't know anything. Usually, the girl friends are the best and the wives are the worst. I didn't know the difference, never being married, so it was all the same to me.

"A man got a hunger on, a starved feeling like for something to eat or drink. So he went looking until he found what he was looking for. When it was all over, the cigarette was smoked, the candy bar eaten up, the drink been drunk, and that was it. He'd be satisfied for a while until the urge came back again. That's the way I always thought it was. First at home here, then with the gals outside the army camps, and then in Europe. All over the world I guess it was the same.

"But now I know what they mean when they talk about one certain woman in their lives. Now I know. You're the one, Ruth-Rachel. That special, certain woman. The best. The best in the whole cockeyed, crazy world. Come here to me."

She moved closer to him, her lips covering his, arms about him in a tight grip.

Sure, that's the way it is, Luther told himself. Exactly that way. So real, he had to blurt out the truth of his feelings to her. Although his experience with sex had come at a reasonably early age, it had always been a hurried, furtive thing, with the fear of discovery hanging over his head, or the girl's. Even with Bethann that night it had been no different, no better; in fact, it had been less pleasurable as they lay there together, he tense and rigid with fear, Bethann crying— Suddenly he remembered. She had cried out a name once or twice, one he had heard recently, had not known then. Gar. Gar, she had cried out. So it hadn't been himself at all, he was doubly sure now. She had been calling out to Gar—Garrett Harwick—thinking it was he who was with her and not Luther Dorman. At this moment he could not translate his feelings in terms of the new knowledge that had come to him.

He lay beside Ruth-Rachel, feeling the warmth of her body next to his. There was no feeling of fear of discovery (as with Cressie Jackson), of disappointment (as with the paid professionals), of

fear and deep guilt (as with Bethann). What he experienced now was a full sense of sharing, a compelling, meaningful feeling even when the act was done with for the moment. He had no words to describe the feeling.

Here with Ruth-Rachel he was beginning to learn the beauty and completeness of *giving* in this all-consuming act. He marveled at her ability to guide, to pace herself and thus teach him to pace himself, to join with her as though they were performing a part in a well-rehearsed play. This was the difference; he was learning the meaning between sheer lust and true, physical love; examining, experimenting in the ultimate act in a partnership that transcended all other relationships between man and woman.

And now again, as they lay back peacefully, the frantic urgency gone for the moment, he closed his eyes and smiled, feeling ease and relaxation, yet with an expectancy of more to come. She lay beside him, her body close to his, the sweet perfume of her in his nostrils. She was lying on her side facing him, nose and mouth nuzzling his neck, an arm across his chest, one round, firm, lovely breast against his left side. The mound of her belly pressed his upper thigh, one leg drawn up and thrown across him. In the moonlight he could see her head turned upward to him, a smile on her face as she snuggled closer to him.

Ruth-Rachel Hagen. Dale Hagen's wife—no, widow. The widow he had made of the wife with a quick burst of flaming death from his carbine. What kind of a man kills another, takes his wife like this, he thought. And on his own wedding night. If she knew. If she knew he was the man who had killed Dale, what would happen then? Would she rise up and tear the hide and flesh from the face and body she was holding and kissing in this way? Would she kill him in justified fury as he slept one night?

She had let him bring her here, haunted by a dead husband she hadn't seen in nearly four years, driven to desperation by a crazed mother-in-law, escaping with him in the only way open to her. He wondered what Bethann was doing at this very moment, what she would feel—if anything—if she knew where he was and with whom. And what would Ruth-Rachel say when he told her that he had been married to Bethann Radford on this very same night, had come looking for her within an hour after the ceremony?

"Luther?" Her voice came out of the dark to sever him from his thoughts.

"What, honey?"

"Did—did Dale have him any of those foreign women?"

He came alert with her mention of Dale's name. "Dale? I—I don't know, Ruth-Rachel. I wasn't with Dale except that last month in Germany and there weren't any women where we were then."

"I guess he did. I guess he did like all the rest. It didn't make any difference if they were married men or not, did it, Luther?"

"I guess it didn't with a lot of men."

"But not Dale?"

"I told you, I didn't know about Dale. I wasn't with him."

"I know, though. I knew Dale pretty good. He always had an eye for it. He never wasted much time, the trips he took to Baton Rouge and New Orleans with Johnny Norris. I'll bet he didn't waste any time over there, either."

"That's crazy," Luther said. "How would you know a thing like that? Besides, why in hell would anybody who had somebody like you to come back to ever want to be with anybody else in the whole world?"

He heard her laugh, like the pleasant tinkling of a bell. She moved up higher on the pillow, kissing his ear, then his cheek and mouth.

"Well, now, maybe you'll tell me something," he said.

"What would you like to know, Luther?"

"Well, how was it—with you—and Dale?"

There was no reluctance on her part to talk about herself and Dale. "He was all right, I guess," she said. "Not anywhere near as good as you. He was always in such a hurry and I always had a feeling that—I don't know—it was as though he thought somebody was watching, peeking in on us. I know that every time we came out of our room and Lutie saw us together, I got a feeling like she'd been watching us all the time. You'd think she was his wife instead of his mother, the looks she'd give us. I never did feel comfortable with her around. Even then there was something always—crazy, I guess—about her."

"You really mean it was better with me?"

"You know it was, Luther. I got that same feeling about you, that you're the best."

He smiled and hugged her closely to himself. "You're the champ," he said.

"You mean that?"

"You know I do."

"You keep on telling me that, you hear."

"Every time from now on. I'll tell you every time. As often as I can."

They slept in each other's arms. When he awakened it was still dark and there was no moonlight. She stirred and moved closer to him, her mouth upon his, not kissing him, just moving her lips over his mouth, then down to his neck. Suddenly he was wide awake, fully alert, and the earlier urgency returned. He began twisting in bed, becoming a mass of tense muscle.

"Relax, Luther honey," she whispered. "Just relax. You're all tied up in knots."

He lay back, breathing heavily while she moved her body across his, the delight and warmth of her an ecstasy almost as climactic as the sex act itself. His arms encircled her, clutching her urgently. She laughed that same light, tinkling laugh again. "Don't rush. The longer you put it off, the longer it lasts and the more you've got to enjoy. Are all Army men in such a hurry to get up and rush off to battle? You're all through with that now, lover boy. Nobody's rushing you now. Take your time."

The gentleness of her voice soothed him. He could feel her body with every physical and mental sense as he clutched her, kissing and fondling her. She began to whisper unintelligibly to him, her movements growing more frantic, and now she, too, was ready. This was not merely sex for the sake of sex alone; it was an art—the art of a million years of practice and knowledge compacted into the body of a twenty-four-year-old woman who, in this sense, was as old as Earth and Time itself. He felt the bruising of her teeth on his lips, the sting of her nails upon his back. The early subtlety was gone now, turned into a brutal, wonderful merging of bodies, both eager, savage. . . .

It came to its convulsive end with a straining hold of one upon the other, then the slow release and a gentle enfolding in each other's arms, becoming a part of the still, soft night that encompassed them.

They slept, both finally at peace.

9.

It was the early, dirty gray of a sunless dawn. The coolness of it struck them as they drove along the paved highway toward Lutie's house, pausing at the entrance lane as he asked, "You think she'll be up this time of the morning?"

Ruth-Rachel shook her head. "She won't wake up till nine or ten. I'll be inside and asleep long before she comes to."

"Then you don't have to be in a hurry to go inside."

"No. You can drive up to the house."

"Okay. We'll have one more cigarette together."

He pulled the car into the driveway and parked, lit two cigarettes and handed her one.

"It's been wonderful," Ruth-Rachel said. "I'm so glad you came by last night, Luther."

"You sure she won't—"

"Luther, she was so looped last night she almost had to crawl to bed on her hands and knees. When she does wake up, she'll probably be at me all day long."

"I'll tell you what. Suppose I come by this afternoon sometime and try to talk to her some more. Maybe that'll take her off your back."

"I wish you would. Only you be sure to make it look like you're coming to see her and not me. Suppose I give you a call when the time seems best. You got a phone up at your place now, haven't you?"

He started suddenly, remembering. "Don't call me at home. You'd better call me at the Hall."

She turned in surprise. "The *Hall*? Radford Hall? You staying up there with the Radfords now?"

"I—uh—guess so. From now on." She looked at him, puzzled. "I didn't tell you last night," he said.

"What?"

"Bethann Radford."

"What about Bethann Radford?"

"We—we—we got married last night."

"Married! You and Bethann Radford? Last night?"

Uncomfortably, he nodded. "The papers were dated back to before the war, but we got married last night."

Ruth-Rachel began to laugh. "*Last night! You were married last night and—and—you—spent your—honeymoon night with me?*"

He nodded. "I guess that's exactly what I did." Speculatively, "You going to hate me for it, Ruth-Rachel?"

She shook her head negatively. "After last night, I couldn't ever hate you, Luther. Why should I? I think that's about the nicest compliment any man could pay a girl, get married to Bethann Radford and then come looking for me to spend his honeymoon with him." Suddenly, she burst into laughter again.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"Oh, Luther," she laughed, almost doubling up.

"What?"

"You. Marrying Bethann Radford last night."

"I guess it does look mighty funny, don't it?"

"That's not the half of it."

"What else?"

"Where we spent the night."

"In that cottage? What about it?"

"Didn't you see whose it was this morning?"

"No. Whose is it?"

"Oh!" Again she was engulfed with laughter.

"Well, who?" he asked with annoyance. "You going to tell me or not?"

"Luther, I saw the name on the mailbox just as we were leaving. Marcus A. Radford was the name on it. We spent your honeymoon in her father's cottage."

Luther's forehead wrinkled into a frown, then relaxed itself into smoothness at the incongruity and humor of the situation. "Well, hell," he said, "I don't know of a better use to put it to. I'll have to remember to thank him for the use of it someday. And maybe ask him for a key of my own."

The morning began to grow lighter and they sat close together, touching each other, neither willing for this moment to come to an end, knowing it must. "I'd better go on in," Ruth-Rachel said finally.

"I guess so," Luther agreed. "I ought to be getting back, too."

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "You sure you don't want me to wait and see if—?" he began.

"It's all right, Luther," she replied. "I'm sure she's still asleep. If she were up, there'd be smoke coming up out of the kitchen stove." She kissed him once more. "You keep that to remember me by until next time."

"Don't you worry about that," he grinned. "I won't be forgetting it in that little bit of time."

She got out of the car and he started the motor, letting it idle as he watched her mount the steps, slip out of her shoes, open the door, and go inside. As it closed on her, he put the car in gear and drove off.

What neither Luther nor Ruth-Rachel saw was Lutie Hagen as she sat with a black knit shawl drawn over her spare shoulders, glowering and mumbling beneath her breath as she peered out through the window at the two figures in the car while they sat smoking, as they kissed, embraced, and parted. She waited until Ruth-Rachel had tiptoed down the hall, then followed and stood

outside her room listening to the sounds of her daughter-in-law getting into her creaky bed. She opened the door quickly and stepped into the room just as Ruth-Rachel was pulling the top sheet up over her nakedness, startled by the sudden appearance of the fiery apparition.

"You common, filthy tramp!" Lutie spat out venomously. "Out all night whorin' around with men, desecrating the memory of my son, your own husband!"

Ruth-Rachel gathered the sheet around her body tightly, virulent resentment mounting in her. Too long had she been the target for Lutie's invective, and now, bolstered by a new strength provided by the thought of Luther as her champion, she began to see the smaller woman as a caricature of the frightening monster she had been.

"You're *evil*!" Lutie ranted. "Through and through, you're wicked, a whore of Babylon. You are Sin and Iniquity and the Devil's Abomination. *Evil! Evil!* That's what men see in you, what my son saw in you!"

"Shut up! *Shut up!* you crazy, drunken old hag!" Ruth-Rachel lashed back at the top of her voice. "You call *me* evil? You filthy witch, you're the most evil, crawling thing on earth! You think I don't know what went on here before I married Dale? You think he didn't tell me everything about you after we were married? That your husband was a no-good drunkard and gambler who got himself killed fighting over a whore? That your oldest son ran off when he was only sixteen and your precious daughter ran off a year later and you never saw or heard from either one of them again? You think he didn't tell me?"

Lutie's face had gone ashen gray, her eyes seeming to recede into two deep, dark caverns from which she peered hollowly at Ruth-Rachel, wrapped in a sheet of white, a spectral vision that attacked her, stripped away every last defense she had. The old woman gripped the edge of the bed to steady herself, fearing what she heard, anticipating what was to come, yet not daring to miss a word, listening with an almost breathless fascination. Ruth-Rachel leaned forward, her rich, heavy blonde hair falling in long, slow waves, hands gathering the sheet about her, a certain beautiful malevolence in her face as her voice flamed with words she knew were cutting deeply into the older woman's heart.

"You lie, you foul woman," Lutie rasped in a low, tormented voice.

"You know I'm not lying, Lutie Hagen. He told me more, too."

The things you did to keep him home and away from girls, telling him the awful things that would happen to him if he had anything to do with them. Crawling into his bed at nights to prove he didn't need anybody but you.

"Sure, Lutie, I know all about it. But he fell in love with me and you couldn't stand it to think somebody else could take your place in his bed. That's why you hate me so much, isn't it? And you call *me* evil!"

Lutie was bent over now, sagging forward, eyes burning with a consuming hatred for the mocking girl before her, unable to bring herself to reply. Ruth-Rachel leaped out of bed, grabbed Lutie's extended hand. "You listen to me, Lutie Hagen," she cried. "I've been all the widow I'm ever going to be, you hear me? Your Dale, he wasn't the sun and the moon and the stars to me the way he was to you, not by a long shot. He was just another little boy who grew up and got married so he could cut his own bellybutton cord and get away from his mother. Then he went and got himself killed *and I'm not married to him any more! Not to a dead soldier! I'm alive!* Just as alive as any other twenty-four-year-old girl, married or single! And what's more, I'm leaving here soon and for good, too. Now you get out of this room. *Get out!* And don't you ever come in here no more!"

Her grip still on Lutie's arm, she tugged the old woman toward the door, opened it, and pulled Lutie into the hallway. The look in her mother-in-law's eyes became one of righteous piety. "The Lord is the beacon of light and He will smite unto death the evil-doers. So sayeth the Lord," she intoned as Ruth-Rachel slammed the bedroom door on her.

10.

It was a little before seven that morning when Luther drove back to Radford Hall and parked the Cadillac in its proper place in the garage. He saw Marcus's blue sedan and the long black limousine, Bethann's car and the station wagon that Newton used for errands and shopping. He went in by the back door since he had no key to the front door yet. Sudie looked up from the stove, saw him, and looked away again. Newton sat at the table with a cup of coffee before him, waiting for his breakfast, and he, too, looked up as Luther stepped into the kitchen.

"Coffee ready?" he asked.

Sudie wordlessly motioned a spatula toward the coffee pot on the stove.

Her silent insolence angered Luther. "I'm telling both of you just this one more time. You're going to treat me like I live here and belong here, or from now on I'm going to treat you like a pair of nigger field hands fresh out of Buckeytown. Don't you go puttin' on any uppity airs with me, by God, or you're going to pay for it and pay for it good. Now you—" he pointed to Sudie—"you stop whatever you're doing this minute and pour me a cup of coffee."

Sudie glared angrily, moved the frying pan to the back of the stove, and replaced the stove lid. She dropped the spatula noisily and went to the cupboard for a cup and saucer. She picked up the coffeepot and poured the coffee and handed it to him. Luther returned her stare and pointed to the table. "Over there," he said, jerking his thumb to where Newton sat sullenly, "and you, get up out of there while I drink my coffee."

Newton grumbled with resentment. "This ain't no place f'white folks to eat breakfus'. Dinin' room's whar Mist' Marcus an' Miss Bethann eats."

"I want my coffee in here at this table and that's where I'm going to have it, nigger, and until you learn your manners to me as Miss Bethann's husband and Mr. Marcus Radford's son-in-law, I'm going to forget my manners to you. On your feet, nigger, or I'll knock you out of that chair clear into Neville County."

Newton leaped out of the chair, stood still with uncertainty for a moment, then shuffled out of the kitchen into the butler's pantry. Sudie put the cup and saucer down on the table with a clatter and went back to the stove, resumed with Newton's breakfast.

Luther drank the coffee, then went upstairs to the room that had been designated as his. He heard no sign of movement in any of the other rooms as he closed his door, stripped off his clothes, and drew the covers off the bed and lay down, pulling the top sheet over him. Within a few moments he was asleep.

He was startled into wakefulness, realizing that the sound of a motor had wakened him. He got up and went to the window and saw Marcus's car pulling out of the back driveway, headed toward town. He went back to the bed, lit a cigarette, and lay down again, wondering what to do next. Lying there, he heard a door close in the hallway. He got up again, opened his door a slight crack and peered out, and saw Bethann, a robe over her nightgown, going into the baby's room. He went back to his own bathroom and showered, unable to shave, since he had not brought any of his gear from the hotel. He dressed in his rumpled trousers and shirt, decided

then that he would drive into town and move his belongings to the Hall.

Downstairs, he passed by the dining room on his way to the car and found Bethann was just starting her breakfast. He came into the room and sat in the chair to her left just as he had been seated at dinner the night before. She looked up from the newspaper, stared at him for a moment, shook her head and smiled; and he returned her smile with a sense of relief.

"Good morning, Miss Bethann," he said.

She laughed. "I think that if you're going to make people believe we are married, you might stop calling me 'Miss.' Married people usually call each other by their first names without the formality of a 'Miss' or 'Mister.'"

He smiled and said, "I'll try to remember that. Uh—"

"What?"

"Miss—I mean Bethann, I'm sorry about some things I said last night. I'd like to apologize if you'll let me."

She said, "You needn't bother, Luther. I think we were both in a proper mood to make some rather snide remarks to each other. If you're interested in some breakfast, just tap that little bell beside you."

He tapped the silver bell twice and Newton came into the room, his face showing no signs of their earlier encounter. He stood beside Luther, waiting for him to speak, and Bethann looked up with a puzzled frown. "Aren't you forgetting your manners, Newton? I should think you might greet Mr. Luther with a proper 'good morning,' don't you?"

"'Scuse me, Miss Bethann," Newton replied, "I done seen Mist' Luthuh once a'ready dis mornin'. Long about seven, when he come home."

Luther looked up at the Negro quickly, and then his eyes met Bethann's and he caught the glint of amusement in them, both recognizing instantly that war between Luther and the servant faction had been declared and was now operative. Luther's face crimsoned as he looked away.

"Why don't you try the homemade sausage and fried cakes this morning, Luther?" she said pleasantly; then without waiting for his answer, added for Newton's benefit, "With eggs. And bring some more hot coffee first, will you, Newton?"

"Yes, ma'am," Newton replied and went out to transmit the order to Sudie.

"Seven o'clock," Bethann mused aloud. "Did you spend a nice honeymoon out?"

Luther regained some of his lost composure now that Newton had left the room. "Better than I expected. I hope you enjoyed your night out, too."

"Very much. I'm glad we're going to take the—broad-minded approach to our—enforced—union. Now that we've gotten it off to a good start and my father has been made happy, let's keep it that way, shall we?"

"If that's the way you want it, Miss Bethann, it suits me fine."

Bethann began to laugh again. "Luther, Luther. What have you gotten yourself into? Forced into a marriage with a girl you have to call 'Miss.'"

"I didn't get forced into anything I didn't want to get into all by myself. I kind of figured that in time—"

The smile, the easy manner left her. "I wouldn't let myself step too far out of bounds if I were you, Luther," she said crisply.

"Well," he replied casually, "you're sitting here making the rules and that's all right with me. I'll play it your way, but only as long as you play by the same rules."

"All right, Luther. Perhaps I made a mistake by losing my temper last night, but the rules I put down still stand. You keep on your side of the line and I'll stay on mine. Now you'd better finish your breakfast and run along to the bank to do whatever your father-in-law has in mind for you. He might get angry and dock you a day's pay."

Luther smiled. "Don't a man in this family get a day or two off for a honeymoon? Even without a wife?"

"I wouldn't know about that. I didn't write the honeymoon rules. You might take that up with Father. By the way, are you going back on duty at any time in the near future?"

"I don't think so," Luther told her, "seeing that your daddy is arranging with Congressman Butcher to have me discharged in a few days or so." He grinned at her with suave satisfaction.

"Oh," she replied. "Well, I'm sure we'll do all we can to live up to the standards expected of us with a hero of such magnitude in the house."

"Thanks. That's real nice of you to say so. I sure hope it won't inconvenience you any, me living here, Mrs. Dorman."

He caught the angry surge in the change of her voice as she turned to him and said, "I'll give you another rule before you leave."

Don't you ever call me that again. I suppose I'll have to submit to your addressing me by my first name, but that's as far—"

At that point her own anger overcame her and she rose and walked out of the dining room. He could hear her rapid footsteps along the hall toward the steps leading upstairs. Newton appeared with the silver coffeepot and, seeing that Bethann had left the room, placed it on the trivet and turned to leave. "Newt!" Luther called.

Newton turned to face him. "Th' name is Newton, Mist' Luthuh," the old Negro said quietly and with controlled dignity.

"All right, Newton. Now you just cancel that breakfast Mrs. Dorman ordered for me. All I want is the coffee. And, Newton?"

"Yes, suh?" The Negro's eyes were still averted over Luther's head.

"One of these days we're going to have us a little showdown around here and I can tell you this right now: you and Sudie are going to lose. So you'd both better make up your minds to one thing or another. You either goin' a treat me like I belong here, or else I'm goin' a treat you like you don't. That's all for now. But remember what I told you."

He drank his coffee, took the peaked uniform cap out from where he had tucked it in his trousers belt, put it on his head, and went out the back way to the car.

11.

Bethann was completely puzzled that she had heard no word from Ross Markland since he went off to join the Navy back in '42. The few times she had seen his father, Otis Markland had been noncommittal about his son's whereabouts, except that he was aboard a destroyer in the Pacific theater of operations.

"Ross, he's all right, last I heard, Miss Bethann. You know how it is in the Navy aboard fighting ships. They don't dare tell you where they are because of the restrictions." As the war progressed, Otis Markland had become more and more depressed, and when the topic of Ross came up, showed little animation or enthusiasm for the subject beyond the usual, "He was fine, last I heard."

She had had a letter recently from Della Borden, now Etheridge, saying that Braden had been given an assignment that would take him back to Europe, but not until it was certain that she would be able to go with him. Meanwhile, they were to be stationed at Langley Field in Virginia and their chances for returning to Regis for a leave of absence were remote since Braden was on standby.

She did not mention Ross, no doubt including him with the sweeping general request, "do write and tell me about everything and everybody."

And then Otis came to see her at the Hall just after breakfast one morning, and Bethann knew that he was fully aware that Marcus would not be home at this hour, that he was coming to see her, and that the visit would concern Ross.

After a few unsmiling preliminaries that dealt with each other's health and well-being, Bethann said, "What is it, Mr. Markland? It ~~is~~ Ross, isn't it?"

Otis nodded sadly. "I brought him home from San Francisco late last night, Miss Bethann," he said sorrowfully. "He's been a mighty sick boy for a long time. Two years now he's been in some kind of shock. About a year ago they brought him back to San Francisco from a hospital in Honolulu. Only this last trip he began to recognize me. I talked with the Navy doctors and they thought it would do him more good now to come home, get back and stir himself around among familiar things and old friends.

"He was on a destroyer that was attacked by Japanese planes back early in '44, and from what the few survivors told about it, it was enough to shock anybody out of their wits. The hospital people, they tried everything, and now they want to try this, what they call home treatment."

Bethann nodded, deeply moved, concerned. She could feel the heavy sadness and anxiety of the old man's burden, the gentle love he felt for Ross manifesting itself from behind the flintlike exterior he normally exposed to the outside world. His watery eyes, so lightly touched with blue that they seemed almost colorless, looked down at his gnarled, vein-lined hands that gripped each other as they lay in his lap.

"Last night, after I got him home and to bed, I had a cot put in his room for me, and I slept there just in case he should wake up and want something. He came into his old room like he was walking in a dream, touching things, the old things he knew for most of his life, and I saw him smile a little bit, the first time since I saw him in that naval hospital the first time. It was a couple of hours before he got into bed to go to sleep. I put out all the lights except one, then went to my room and got undressed and came back to sleep in the cot, thinking Ross would be asleep already. But he wasn't. He wanted to talk and that's what the doctors hoped would happen. Finally, he wanted to talk.

"Funny thing was that as close as we'd always been to each

other, particularly since his mother died, he didn't want to talk about her, me, or anybody else except—you. For almost an hour he couldn't talk about anything else but you. First, he asked all kinds of questions about you, then he talked about you and some of the things—well, he talked and talked until he just fell asleep, plumb wore out. I thought when he started talking it was going to be about that—that—" he hesitated as though unwilling to mention the name, then it came out—"that—Della Borden, the one he was so gone on who married Braden Etheridge, but he didn't even mention her once. Just you. I—ah—didn't tell him—about you and that Dorman boy—that you were married to him."

He sighed as though with relief that he had been able to get through the telling. "This morning, early, I called Dr. Phipps and had him come out with a nurse, showed him the records and what the Navy people recommended in the way of local treatment."

For a moment Bethann sat in silence, then said, "You want me to go see Ross, don't you, Mr. Markland." It was a statement rather than a question.

"I'd be mighty beholden to you if you could do that, Miss Bethann. That is, if your—new husband, he don't object. I wouldn't ask it of you, but you were the only one he wanted to talk about and I—"

Bethann reached over the short space that separated them and put a hand on his clenched fists and said, "Please, Mr. Markland, I want very much to see Ross. If I can help in any way at all, I want to. Ross was, and I hope still is, a very dear friend of mine."

Otis Markland stood up and turned away and she could see that this was because he wanted to hide the tears that had come into his eyes as she spoke. "Thank you, Miss Bethann," he said. "Dr. Phipps said it could—might—" He started toward the front door. "Thanks," he said finally without turning back to her.

"I'll be there as soon as I can change," Bethann replied

She had been in the Markland home many times for parties and other social events as a child and in her teen years. This was the first time she had been above the first floor. Ross's room was large and square, with a huge tester bed that stood upon a raised platform so that when he was propped up with two big pillows behind him, he could look out through the ceiling-to-floor windows and across the gallery and trees to the river in the distance.

Ross lay in the center of the bed, a gaunt figure with sunken cheeks and eyes that were darkly shadowed in their deeply recessed

sockets. What struck her as most different about him was his extreme paleness, for Ross had lived an athletic, outdoor life at college in Chancellor and here in Regis, and had become so elegantly bronzed by the sun that she had always assumed this to be his natural color. Two years within the walls of Navy hospitals had removed the protective coloration and his skin was a gray-tinged white.

The nurse left them when Bethann entered, and at first he hadn't noticed she was there as he lay flat on his back, looking up at the canopy over his bed.

"Ross?" she called softly.

He gave no indication that he had heard her. She came closer to the side of the bed. "Ross?" she said again.

Slowly, his head turned on the pillow to face her. An almost startled look came into his eyes when he saw her, his mouth tightening into a thin line, eyebrows forming a frown as he studied her face. "It's Bethann, Ross," she said. "How are you?"

His mouth opened slightly and his left hand moved toward her. She took it into her own and leaned down to be closer to him. "Oh, Ross," she said. "It's good to see you again. I'm so glad you're home. In a little while everything will be the same as it was before and you'll be fine again."

She saw the tears form in his eyes and run uncontrolled down his cheeks. Instinctively, she put her small handkerchief to his face and dabbed them away. He tried to bury his face into the pillow as he cried in weakness. Bethann smoothed his hair back with her free hand, then put her mouth close to his ear and whispered, "Ross, Ross, it's all over now; the whole ugly thing is over. There's so much to be happy for, to live for."

He said in a low voice, "Bethann. Oh, Bethann."

These were the only words he spoke. He lay with his face pressed along her arm and then she sat on the bed beside him. An ease came over him and in a little while he was asleep. She removed her arm from his grasp and went out into the hallway where Dr. Phipps was waiting with Otis Markland. Together they went down the stairs as the nurse went back into Ross's room.

"I don't have to tell you how important your visit has been today, Mrs. Dorman," the doctor said. "I know from Mr. Markland that Ross got a severe blow even before he went into the Navy—when Miss Borden married Braden Etheridge. The jilting was one thing, but that, topped by his horrifying experience aboard that destroyer, picked up after nine days and nights of floating around out there

in the Pacific alone, wounded, burned, and I don't know what else, are responsible for his unwillingness to return to reality. I'm a general practitioner, Mrs. Dorman, but from the records the Navy psychiatrists and psychologists have sent along with Mr. Markland, I think there's a chance you can do more for him than any medicines we doctors might prescribe can ever hope to accomplish."

Otis Markland's questioning look fell upon her, the significant plea in his old eyes. She nodded soberly to both men. "I'll be happy to do anything I can for Ross. Please don't think I'm saying this to be charitable. Ross and I went to school here in Regis. We were at the university in Chancellor together. We were very close friends, particularly during the months prior to his leaving Regis to join the Navy. I want to do everything I possibly can to help a very dear friend."

Dr. Phipps expelled a deep breath, smiled. "Good," he said with an expansive gesture of his hands. "Good. If you can manage to drop by two or three times a week during the next few weeks whenever you feel so inclined, you'll be the best medicine I can prescribe for him."

Otis came to her, took both her hands into his. "God bless you, Miss Bethann. You don't know what this means to me, to have my only son back from the dead." And then, remembering with embarrassment, "I'm sorry, Miss Bethann, I didn't mean to bring back any memories—"

"It's all right, Mr. Markland," she said. "And don't you worry. I think Ross is going to be fine. Just fine."

Ross's recovery came rapidly, a near miracle, according to Dr. Phipps. Within a week of daily visits from Bethann, Ross began to speak to the nurse, to his father, and to Dr. Phipps. His anorexia, or loss of appetite, was gone. Bethann would drop by for an hour or two and read items of interest to him from the daily papers. When she skipped a day, he would fall back into a moody silence and remain so until she appeared the following day. Within a few weeks he was up, proud to practice walking about the room in order to impress Bethann on her subsequent visits; then he was downstairs, sitting in the sunshine, sunbathing on a pad on the lawn to regain his earlier bronzing. Later, Bethann took him for long drives in her car and, when they were out on the open road, would permit him to take the wheel. At first he showed signs of nervousness, driving slowly and with a seeming reluctance, but in time he got over his small fears.

Not once had he mentioned Della Borden or her husband, Braden Etheridge. She was tempted to bring Della's name into one of their conversations, but decided that if her name was to be spoken, it must come from him. She was equally reluctant to mention Garrett's name to him. And then one day, as if a sudden brilliant light had been focused in a dark corner, he said excitedly, "The baby! Bethann, the baby! What happened about the baby, Bethann!"

So now his sense of recall had extended all the way back to before the war and this was the final sign of full recovery in him. There was some hesitancy on Bethann's part to talk to him about Harriet, but he became more insistent, feeling himself a dramatic part of the tremendous adventure that had involved them together. "Tell me, Bethann, what happened?" he demanded with an overpowering eagerness, grasping her hands tightly, his eyes intent and determined.

She fumbled for a starting place, then decided to begin where Ross had touched it last. She brought him from that moment when he had left her at the hotel in New Orleans through Harriet's birth and their eventual return to Regis. Ross hung onto every word, his eyes glittering with the turmoil her story stirred up in him.

"Then what, Bethann? How did your father take it?"

"Ross, it doesn't seem to matter about that now."

"Why not? Why wouldn't it matter to him?"

She said slowly, "Ross, I'm married."

He withdrew from her as though she had struck him. "Mar—mar— No, Bethann, *no!*" The hurt was back in his eyes along with the tears

"Listen, Ross," she said. "Listen to me. Let me explain. It—it—we were married shortly after he returned to Regis. It was—" she waved with a helpless gesture and looked away from him—"for—convenience."

"Convenience? Convenience? What—?"

"Please, Ross, let me explain."

He sat in confusion, suffering, withdrawn. "You remember Luther Dorman, don't you, the newspaper stories I've read to you about him, the sergeant from Regis who won the Medal of Honor?"

Ross nodded silently.

"Luther Dorman and I—are—married, Ross," she said.

His expression did not change. He sat staring at her oval face, the loveliness of her well-defined features, the tenseness in her eyes as she looked back into his; and now there was a growing tightness at both corners of her mouth, wondering how much harm she had

done in the telling. She saw the shock that came over him slowly, the firm knot of muscle along his jawline standing out as his teeth clenched down hard. His fingers were tight fists, white knurls showing along the ridge of his knuckles.

"Luther Dorman," he said. "Wasn't he—the one—who went to school with us—long ago?"

She nodded. "His father and sister have a cottage down at the west line of Radford Hall. We all used to swim in our creek together when we were kids. Jud Dorman was once a handyman on our place, a tenant. Carrie worked at the Hall until recently, helping out with the housework. Luther is Jud's son."

"You mean that drunken old Jud—Dorman? *His son?*"

"He's Jud Dorman's son, Ross."

He turned away from her. "Oh, Christ!" he exclaimed under his breath.

His attitude angered her. Not because of Luther, not because of what she had done to protect Harriet, to keep her from being taken away from her, not because she had been caught between Luther's demand and Marcus's urging that the marriage was her wisest course. She suddenly thought that Della Borden's rejection of Ross had contributed in some large measure to what had happened to him, apart from his experience aboard the ship that had been sunk from under him. During all the time she had spent with him since his return from San Francisco, he had never once mentioned Della's name, yet he sat here now judging her behavior before he understood the circumstances behind it, the necessity for it. Now she began to question her own conduct, whether her visits to Ross had been a wise thing, regardless of Dr. Phipps's or Otis Markland's opinions—wondering if Ross had not experienced a form of transference of affection from Della to herself.

She spoke slowly and matter-of-factly now, deciding to tell him the entire story. Let him think what he would of her. Let him tell her to go away and not return. It would be better that way than to have to hide this part of her life that was already growing too cumbersome for her to carry alone on her shoulders. He had known of her illicit affair with Garrett and, somehow, this hadn't seemed to bother him in the least before. Now he would know there had been another—Luther Dorman.

She told him of the night she had spent with Luther in the woods, tried to make him understand the despair that had driven her there, the means she had taken to help her forget; and how, after the war, Luther, believing the baby to be his, had threatened to

take Harriet from her by legal action. And how Marcus had seen in Luther a means to legitimize Harriet and turn what had become a sordid affair into one of pure white romance, complete with a secret marriage to a male Cinderella who had gone from a few poor acres of ground to become one of the nation's best-known heroes.

"You know he could never have made it stick in any court, don't you?" Ross said when she finished.

Bethann shook her head. "It wasn't that so much as it was the publicity that would have been involved. Anything he would say or do at the time—even now—would have brought the reporters and photographers on the run. Every newspaper and picture magazine in the country would have splashed us over their front pages. Think what it would mean for Harriet when she grows up, the notoriety she would have to endure all her life. No one could ever hope to live that down, Ross."

He sat silently and she could hear the sound of his teeth grinding together. "Ross," she said finally with some trace of exasperation, "why is what I did so important to you? After all, you knew about me and Garrett, you knew I was carrying his child. You know now—"

"Why? Why, Bethann? Because I love you, that's why."

"—what kind of a person—?" Suddenly she stopped, hearing his words over her own. "Wha—what?" she exclaimed.

"I love you," he repeated softly. "No, this isn't any sudden thing that happened since I've been back. It started long ago, after the—thing—with Garrett. Before I went into the Navy I wanted to tell you, wanted to marry you then so that the baby would be born with my name, but I knew it was too soon, much too soon for you; you were still too close to Garrett. And, besides, you would think it was a case of common disaster, the making of friends between the afflicted. Garrett dead and Della gone off to marry Brade Etheridge:

"Dad, Dr. Phipps, even you, all think that I had Della on my mind when I went into the Navy." He shook his head. "That wasn't so, Bethann. I'd known for a long time that it would never work out between Della and me. She'd told me so before, a number of times. I won't deny I was hard hit by her refusals, that it hurt like all hell when she eloped with Brade. But by the time I was ready to leave, she was practically out of my thoughts.

"I know you're going to say that it's all connected up with Della, that I was—am—on the rebound, but I swear to you, Bethann, it

isn't that. Even now, I don't give a damn about your marriage to Luther Dorman, as long as it is for—convenience, that you don't really love him."

"Ross," she said in a low, frightened voice. "Oh, Ross. I don't love him. I don't. We're not living together as man and wife, nor have we ever. He has a room at the Hall. He works at the bank at some job or other. I don't even know at what. He comes and goes as he pleases and no one even cares. Certainly I don't."

"Then— And there's no one else?"

"No. Unless you can consider the work I do at the hospital library." Suddenly she laughed. "It might even interest you to know that on the night Luther and I were married, I spent six solid hours at the library office bringing my records up to date."

His voice rose excitedly again. "Then, Bethann—"

"Let's don't talk about it any more right now, Ross. At this very moment I can't say I love you. Neither can I say I don't love you. I don't even think I know what love is any more. But if it hurts or distresses you to think I might be in love with Luther, don't let it do that to you. I'm not."

"All right," Ross said. "Maybe it will work out. If we give it a chance. If we try."

"Maybe it can, Ross," she replied.

"Then will you try? Will you give it a chance? Please, Beth?"

She smiled. "I'll give it every chance—every chance in the world. And I'll do everything in my power to help it along."

"Oh, Bethann. Bethann, darling," he whispered.

12.

Marcus walked across the hall toward the office of the Senate Majority Leader with Dan Cornell on one side of him, Ray Crissman on the other. Crissman held a sheaf of papers in one hand, trying to stuff them into a brief case that was already bulging.

"Ray," Marcus said, "why don't you take these things over to the hotel and put them in order while Dan and I get a bite? When the committee meets at four this afternoon, I'll drop by and—" He stopped short, his eyes picking out the familiar figure of Tracy Englander. No, he caught himself—Pickett. Tracy Pickett, he remembered. She had emerged suddenly from another corridor, turned into this one ahead of them, and then he was conscious only of the staccato *click! click!* of her heels on the colorful terrazzo blocks.

"Excuse me," Marcus said. "Why—ah—why don't you go along with Ray, Dan, and I'll see you both later at the meeting. I've just

remembered something very important that I've let go for too long. Sorry."

Cornell looked up ahead and recognized Tracy. He turned back to Marcus and smiled lightly. "Of course, Marc. You go ahead. Ray and I will take care of things with the committee people until you drop by." Cornell took the committee's advisor on legislative matters by the arm and guided him back to the bank of elevators. Marcus stepped up his pace, saw the trim figure in a lightweight blue-gray suit turn into the corridor to her left, and walked faster to intercept her before she could reach her obvious destination, the capitol press-room.

"Tracy!" he called sharply

She spoke his name almost before she turned to see him. "Hello, Marc." She smiled warmly, extending a hand.

"Tracy," he repeated her name softly, taking her hand, smiling with delight as though savoring a delicate flavor, feeling the powerful, joyous lift in being so close to her. "It's been such a long time."

"Yes, hasn't it?" she said, still smiling. "I came over today for the first time in months because Hap Kilmer went to the hospital with a perforated ulcer yesterday and I can't spare another man at the moment. But I've been keeping tabs on you indirectly. Marc, how are you?"

"Fine. Just fine, Tracy. I—I hope you're not too busy for lunch."

She looked at her wrist watch. "No," she smiled. "As a matter of fact, I was heading back to the pressroom to find someone to have lunch with. Someone other than a Senator, that is."

"I'll be happy to fill the order."

"Good. The cafeteria here?" she asked.

"Why not? With all the crowd and noise, it's probably the most private place in the whole town." He laughed happily. "It's wonderful seeing you again, Tracy. You look positively glorious."

They started back along the corridor toward the elevators that would take them to the cafeteria on the basement level.

"How is—your husband?" Marcus asked.

"You tell me first, how is Bethann?" Tracy countered question with question.

Marcus paused, then said, "She's fine." Then after a moment, in a lower tone, "She had the baby in '42. A fine little girl."

"I read about her—ah—marriage. To Luther Dorman, the Medal of Honor hero."

"You didn't read the story correctly," he said. "The story, as it

was given out, read that she and Luther had been married secretly before the war."

"I was reading between the lines, Marc," she said.

For the moment he was silent.

"Tell me, Marc, is Bethann happy? Or reasonably so?"

He shrugged. "Why shouldn't she be with a fine hero husband, a beautiful, healthy daughter, a big, roomy home, and all that money can buy?"

"And all that money can buy," Tracy repeated. "You didn't really answer my question at all, did you, Marc? Is she happy?"

He sighed. "I don't know." Then, resignedly, "No, I suppose not."

"And how is it between you and Bethann?"

He shook his head negatively without speaking.

"Oh, Marc, I'm so sorry. I had hoped that would be wiped out between you by now. Did you ever—?"

"I tried, Tracy. Believe me, I tried, but it was too late. You were right. I should have done it sooner, much sooner. Now," he added sadly, "the anger and hatred are so deeply rooted, so far down inside her that I can't reach them."

"I'm truly sorry, Marc. I wish I could have helped."

He shrugged. "You didn't know it then, but the day I drove up to Riverdale to see you, then came over here because you wouldn't drive to Riverdale—do you remember, Tracy?"

She nodded. "I remember. I couldn't forget the last time we saw each other."

"That was the night, Tracy. The night I came to ask you to marry me. Instead—instead—"

She stopped walking. Up ahead before the elevators, a small knot of people waited. "Marc," she said suddenly, "could we walk over to the hotel instead? All of a sudden the thought of clattering dishes and chattering people and standing in line getting pushed about doesn't appeal to me."

"Feel better now?" Marcus asked when the table was cleared and the waiter had brought a fresh pot of coffee.

"Much better, thank you." Tracy smiled, taking a cigarette from her purse as Marcus struck a light for her.

"You haven't told me about your—Jeff, isn't it?"

"That's right. Jeff." She exhaled the smoke to one side, turned to face him. "It isn't working, Marc," she said simply.

"I'm sorry, Tracy."

"Are you really?"

"Not that it isn't working," he said with outright honesty. "Only that you're unhappy."

She shrugged. "One of the breaks of life. No promises, no guarantees, except that nothing lasts forever and everything comes to an end. Sooner or later."

"And this came sooner. What are you doing about it?" Marcus asked.

"Acting very civilized. There aren't any complications, no financial difficulties or important differences. All we want is freedom from each other. Jeff has an offer to represent a national syndicate out of Washington and I've even offered to buy his Washington column for the *Examiner* when he starts it. Once the papers are filed, he leaves for his new job. That will be in about a week or ten days. A year from that date I'll be what is laughingly referred to as a free woman."

"And meanwhile?"

"And meanwhile, there will be a paper to publish, a war that needs to be fought to a finish in the Pacific, a million other important details to fuss and worry and nag and niggle over."

"And one other small, unimportant detail," Marcus said.

"Something I've overlooked? What?"

"Me," he replied seriously. "Us. We can't let it drop again, Tracy."

Tracy said nothing for a moment. She looked steadily at Marcus through eyes that were beginning to fill. She coughed, reached for her napkin to cover her mouth and dab at her eyes surreptitiously. She got up and left the dining room, returned in a few minutes with her make-up and composure restored, her face sober.

He stood up. "Shall we leave now?" Tracy asked.

He nodded, then looked away to scribble his signature and the number of his suite on the check. Outside, facing the broad avenue that led into Capitol Park, he said, "Tracy, I meant it. As much as I meant it the night I came up to Riverdale."

"Please, Marc," she said. "Not now. I made one mistake by jumping too quickly when Jeff asked me to marry him late the same night you came to tell me about Bethann and—and— But I'll be very happy if you'll let me know when you come to Chancellor from now on."

Chapter 13

1.

On August 6, 1945, a terrifyingly new and astounding weapon was unleashed upon the world when a United States Air Corps bomber dropped history's first atomic bomb on an enemy city, the city of Hiroshima in Japan. Few knew at the time the full extent of its horror, but its force and powers of devastation sent cracks and crevices spreading outward as far as Tokyo; and three days later, on August 9, when the second and larger atomic bomb fell upon Nagasaki, the war in the Pacific split at its every seam. The next day, the Imperial Japanese government began broadcasting its request for a peace. On Tuesday, August 14, 1945, that peace became a fact. And when the official and formal signing of the surrender took place aboard the U.S.S. *Missouri* on September 2, there was a picture of Master Sergeant Luther Dorman on the front page of the *Herald*, next to the one of the ceremonial signing and the closeup photograph of General Douglas MacArthur, to remind Regis readers that there was a hero still among them.

Regis was in no way different in the tempo of its celebration than New York, London, Paris, Moscow, and every victory-hungry city and village between. In size, yes. In spirit, no.

There was a torchlight parade, dancing in the Square; prayers were offered in churches, statements and speeches made by leading citizens and dignitaries. Luther Dorman was made Grand Marshall of the parade, and he stood shoulder to shoulder with Congressman Earl Butcher, United States Senator Tilghman Prather, Marcus Radford, Otis Markland, Ed Pringle, the mayor, the five-member body of County Supervisors, the entire City Council, members of every veterans' organization, and Sheriff Will Bartly.

In the streets people hugged and squeezed each other and paraded together in noisy glee with locked arms so that traffic came to a standstill. And for once no one minded. They drank together openly and screamed themselves hoarse. When Luther appeared in

uniform for the occasion, people ran out to touch his hand or the sleeve of his shirt, grab at his cap, seeing in him the symbol of a husband, son, or father not yet returned. They were noisy in their hysterical happiness and it was difficult for the speakers on the stand in the Square to make themselves heard; but they all turned soberly respectful and quiet when Luther Dorman rose to address them.

"Folks, good friends and neighbors," he said, "I know how most of you-all feel now that this war is finally over. The victory is ours, but we got to remember that the cost was heavy. You all got the right to celebrate and cheer and dance, but we also got to remember something else: there's a lot of folks who have a sorrow instead of a joy tonight because a son or a husband or a father won't be coming home to them. And when the living come home, it won't make it any easier for those who have left someone they love behind. I'm asking you, before you do any more celebrating, to join in a solemn prayer for those men who died so that the peace we've got now could be made; and also, that the Good Lord bring comfort to the grieving."

To the front of the platform came the Reverend Thomas Thurgood of the Regis Baptist Church to lead the jam-packed Square in prayer. Heads bowed, all listened with grave reverence as Dr. Thurgood spoke; and Marcus Radford glanced out of the corner of his eye, taking note how the celebrating mob had stopped to listen to the voice of Luther Dorman, the hero of Regis, his son-in-law—realizing that even he had not thought, on the spur of the moment, to have chosen so powerful an appeal that had brought a pushing, shoving, laughing, dancing, and drinking mob of excited celebrants to sober reflection so quickly and effectively.

In Buckeytown the celebration was tumultuous. The first word had come late in the afternoon when Euphemia Stookey, a big-boned slattern of a woman, heard the news on her "raddio." Bare-footed, dressed in a single garment that barely covered her from abundant bosom to knees, she burst out of her weatherbeaten shack and screamed to the world at large, "*It's ovuh! It's all ovuh! Mah Billy-Joe, he's goin' a come home to his evuh-lovin' wife! It's ovuh! Th' Good Lawd bless eve'ybody, it's ovuh!*"

Behind her came a youth of thirteen or fourteen, saliva bubbling from his mouth, his head bobbing to one side as he lurched and stumbled along after his mother, squealing a meaningless, idiotic babble of garbled sounds.

Others came bursting out of their shacks and cottages, mostly

women, who now outnumbered the remaining men by a good three to one. Those men who were home joined the gathering throngs. Bottles and jugs began to make an appearance, and then city buses and private cars began to arrive from the town across County Road as workers in Regis were given the day off to go home and be with their equally happy families and friends. Trucks dropped more men and women off, and they ran screaming wildly down the paths that led to Buckeytown. By nightfall the celebration was completely out of hand. Bands of people scrounged the area for food and more drink. Men and women, as well as boys and girls, were pairing off to make the most of this night, running off into the woods, happy with laughter, carrying their bottles and jugs with them. The word had reached far across the river into the Swamp where a holiday was immediately ordered, and the workers poled themselves out toward Buckeytown carrying as much white lightning as they could pile into their pirogues.

The Right Reverend Drummond Haig and the Reverend Joshua Treefill made little effort to stem the inevitable tide of humanity, knowing the whole thing had gone too far for anyone to pay the slightest bit of attention to them. Many families remained in their homes to pray their individual thanks that the war was done, that their loved ones would be returning safely, that there would be no more lonely nights, no more frightening lists of casualties to pore over meticulously by lamplight.

Lida-Mae Tilebin had fed her two children, put them to bed, then sat quietly on her darkened porch in a rocking chair. She could hear the din, the screaming, chanting, drumming, the raucous blasts of a trumpet shattering the quiet even from this distance of a good eight blocks from the center of the activity. She could see the glare in the sky that came from a huge bonfire and it left little to her imagination. She smoked a cigarette and was happy for the immediate calm that surrounded her, the knowledge that her husband would be coming home for good very soon. Very soon, the letter she'd had that very morning said reassuringly. "Dr. Clarke told me that if the stump keeps healing as well as it has, he'll sign my release papers in maybe a couple or three weeks."

Now she thought about how things would be when he returned and they would take up their life together; how it would be to leave Buckeytown and go by freighter to Italy, the quiet, lovely little town Robbie had told her about that was just north of Naples on the way to Rome, where they could live among a happy, warm

people in peace and freedom and without want or fear, his pension more than enough for their needs. Away for all times from the evil that pursued her here, the evil that would be a threat to Robbie's life if he should ever find out.

She heard footsteps crunching the gravel, looked up and saw her neighbors, Henry-Abe Johnson and his wife Maybelle, walking toward her hand in hand.

"Didn't see no light in yo' house, Lida-Mae, an' we wondered if maybe you put the child'un to bed and gone in to see the doin's," Henry-Abe said.

"No. I put the children to bed and was just sitting here being happy and thinking," Lida-Mae replied. Henry-Abe and Maybelle lived across the street and seldom passed without stopping by to see if there was something she needed that they could bring to her, do for her or the children.

"We goin' in to watch the goin's on," said Maybelle. "If you like to come along, we won't be stayin' too long."

"No thanks, Maybelle. I think I'd rather sit out here and think about it and Robbie and—well, just things. It'll be too noisy and pushy there tonight. I'll wait and do my celebratin' with Robbie when he comes home for good."

"They sure havin' a time for theyselves," Henry-Abe acknowledged. "I come by there on'y a hour ago an' they just about tearin' things to pieces."

"They won't come this far," Lida-Mae said. "You-all go ahead and enjoy yourselves. We'll be all right here. When you're finished and on your way home, stop in and I'll make some coffee for us."

"We'll do just that," Maybelle agreed. "We be back in maybe an hour an' tell you what's goin' on."

They left and Lida-Mae sat rocking in her chair. She lit another cigarette and thought what a wonderfully pleasant place this could be for them if it wasn't for such things as— But why think about it? It would never be the same as Robbie told her things were in Italy, where color wasn't important. There would be much to discover, she knew, just as there would be much here that they would be happy to leave behind; and some of it they would miss dreadfully.

She didn't see him until he put his foot on the bottom step, then came quickly up on the porch and stood looking down on her. She stopped rocking and looked upward as the cigarette fell from her hand to the wooden floor of the porch, her fingers suddenly too weak to hold onto it. Even in the moonless dark with her back to

him, she knew the face that was hidden in the shadow of that wide-brimmed hat. She felt the chill pass through her, and then her fingers gripped the arms of the rocker, her tongue pressed hard against the inside of her clenched teeth. He took a step toward her and stepped on the cigarette, crushing the flamed tip out, then stood before her.

"You want a be a little more careful with your cigarettes, Lida-Mae," Hessie Loomis said. "How come you ain't down there celebrating the end of the war with the rest of 'em?"

Still she could not speak. He took one hand off his pistol belt and lifted it to rub at the stubble on his face, then dropped it to her shoulder, pulling the strap of her dress down and out of the way, letting his hand rest on the bareness it found there

"Let's you and me go inside, Lida-Mae," he said

"No!" She spoke the single word with a short, explosive gasp.

"I said let's go inside. Ain't goin' a help you one bit to put up a fuss. You get up an' go inside or I'll carry you to my car an' take you to the Regis jailhouse. You force me to do that, it's goin' a take a whole lot longer before you get home again. Maybe days."

He reached down and unclasped a hand from the rocker arm, tightened his grip on her wrist, and pulled her upward to her feet. "No, Mr. Loomis," she pleaded. "Please. My two children are in there. Please. Why don't you go away and come back later on? Give me some time to take them to a neighbor. Please, Mr. Loomis."

His grip on her hand tightened even more now. "An' give you a chance to scoot out on me? No, gal, not this time." He began to lead her inside the dark cottage. "Come on," he said brutally. "It's been a long time an' I been savin' up a lot just for you."

When the Johnsons returned, Henry-Abe flushed with drink and the excitement shared with their friends in town, they walked along anticipating their visit and coffee with Lida-Mae. A half block from the Tilebin house they saw the long figure of the chief deputy come down the steps, glance about him, then move up the street to where his car was parked. He got into the car, started it, turned his headlights on, and began driving slowly in the direction of the heart of Buckeytown. Henry-Abe and Maybelle exchanged mournful, knowing glances as they continued to walk slowly toward the Tilebin cottage, the joy of celebration gone out of them. Outside the house they hesitated, and then Maybelle said with sudden anger, "Let's go home, Henry-Abe. She ain' goin' a be in no mood for no coffee this late at night."

One day during the following week Luther came out of the Regis dining room after lunch and started for the lobby desk to pick up a copy of the *Herald*. As he neared the cigar stand, he felt the hard grip of a hand on his shoulder and turned to look into the sun-darkened face of Johnny Norris in the blue uniform of a naval officer, two rows of battle-starred ribbons over his left breast pocket and two full stripes of senior lieutenant cuffing his sleeves.

"Hi you, Luther!" Johnny exclaimed, pumping the hand a surprised and happy Luther had extended.

"Hi you, Johnny! Where you been goofin' off while the shootin' war was goin' on?" Luther clapped an arm around Johnny's shoulder, laughing with pleasure at the sight of him.

Johnny pointed to Luther's light blue ribbon. "Hell, we all couldn't take time out to go playing hero. How'd you really get it, boy? Scrounging an air mattress for your commanding general?"

"Better than that. I had direct connections with an outfit here that was sending me genuine Regis County white lightning, enough for the whole division staff. No kidding, Johnny, where you been?"

"Out in the Pacific, riding around in a PT boat. Nothing to get a Medal of Honor for. Not even a Navy Cross," he added. "I heard about Dale." Johnny shook his head sadly. "That was a rough shake."

Luther nodded in silence, licking at his dry lips. "How's Tam, Johnny?" he asked. "I dropped by the poolroom coupla times but he wasn't there."

"Tam's going to have to quit, Luther. Doc Roland says he's got to take it easy. Give up smoking, drinking, the works. He's over the hill, I guess."

"You going to take over, Johnny?"

"Sure. Soon as I can get out of this uniform. Hey, you're not looking for a job, are you? I could use an old hand like you." He caught himself abruptly. "I guess not, though. You being Marcus Radford's son-in-law, I hear."

"Don't be too sure about that, Johnny. I might be coming to ask you sooner than you think."

Johnny said, "Any time you're ready, come see me, buddy."

"Sure. Thanks, Johnny. Nice seeing you again."

Regis came out of her celebrations and began to look forward to the return of her menfolks, white and colored, for more than per-

sonal and family reasons. This was no important war industrial area and the labor shortage had been acute. Men who hadn't gone into military service had drifted off to the industrial cities up north, to the steel center in Alabama, west to the aircraft and electronics plants. Fruit, vegetable, and cotton crops had suffered, were pitifully below normal at a time when markets were demanding maximum production in every commodity. Even the women and children had been drafted and lured to the fields by promises of higher pay; and yet there had been insufficient hands for all the work that needed to be done.

December passed.

In Chancellor, Robert Cleland Bentley, who now wore a third star of lieutenant general on his shoulders, led a massive welcoming parade through the streets of the capital and stood on the reviewing stand with the governor, lieutenant governor, state dignitaries and officials, judges, legislators. With them, between the governor and General Bentley, stood Master Sergeant Luther Dorman, Medal of Honor hero. Behind him stood Marcus Audrey Radford. As the troops passed in review, Luther caught sight of Harry Bledso and the familiar face of Major (now Lieutenant-Colonel) Edgar Thorpe.

A feeling of uneasiness fell over Luther as he stood between the general and governor, knowing he did not belong here surrounded by these hard and wearied combat-toughened veterans. He felt none of the pride or elation in the commendatory words of the governor and other orators who were using this moment of public exposure for their need to be seen and heard. The eyes of the troops who stood at ease at the base of the platform, he felt, were staring at him, nailing him to his own guilt, accusing him. Each man seemed to be staring directly into his eyes, whispering, "*Coward! Murderer! Thief! Liar!*" over and over again. Self-pity and contempt flooded him as the thousands of laudatory words rang out and the explosions of countless flash bulbs turned the evening dusk back into momentary daylight. Once again, he knew, the newspapers and magazines and newsreels would feature his picture and write of his "outstanding heroism" in that black forest in Germany.

The parade was over. Marcus had business to attend to with state party leaders and key legislators. "You'll want to get together with your old friends, Luther," he said. "I've got these people to see and I don't know how long I'll be. You go on ahead and enjoy yourself and charge anything you want to your room. Don't bother to phone me. I'll probably be up late tonight and sleep in tomorrow morning."

"Sure," Luther agreed willingly. He didn't want Marcus around when he met Harry Bledso again, or stood with Thorpe and the

general, the very few others he could remember from Germany. They were all pleased to see him, remarking over his fitness, having heard from Bledso of their experiences in Washington and on bond tour—far more exciting and dangerous than combat duty, Bledso assured them with a broad smile and knowing wink.

They dined early in a party of twenty-four, with Mrs. Bentley, Judge and Mrs. Bledso, and others. Luther, after a harrowing hour and a half between General and Mrs. Bentley, sought out Harry Bledso, who was having an after-dinner drink with Colonel Thorpe at the private bar that had been set up in a corner of the small dining room.

“—and by tomorrow noon,” Thorpe was saying, “if I’ve gotten myself anywhere near sober, I hope to fly to Washington, then on home, then back to Kilmer for separation and home again. For good. I saw my wife in New York when we debarked and that was a sight that made me resolve never to leave home again without her, not even to go to the corner store for a loaf of bread or a pack of cigarettes. And another thing—” He broke off suddenly as he caught a glimpse of Luther approaching them. “Well, if it isn’t our Division Hero, Master Sergeant Luther Dorman. Hail, Prince of Battle, we who died salute you!”

Luther looked startled for a moment, but the smile on Thorpe’s face reassured him. “Hello, Major,” he replied. “Excuse me, I meant Colonel.”

“Hello, Luther,” Harry Bledso said with a welcoming smile. “Sorry I couldn’t get to see you before we formed up. Are you staying here at the hotel?”

“602. Nice room overlooking the capitol mall. My father-in-law is in Suite 600.”

Thorpe said, “Now how about *that*? I hear you married the banker prince’s daughter. I hope, Sergeant, that your fairy tale ends as happily as all others have in the past.”

Luther looked up quickly, unable to place Thorpe’s tone, suspecting the tinge of sarcasm in his voice. He assumed that the thickness in it was the whiskey Thorpe had been consuming. “You fellows like to come up to the room and freshen up?” he invited.

Bledso said, “That would be fine, Luther. Ed is staying the night at my home and we could both use a cleanup before the big festivities begin at the governor’s mansion.”

In the large, twin-bedded 602, Thorpe had undressed down to his shorts, went to the bathroom to shower as Bledso and Luther settled back for a chat. Luther offered Bledso a cigarette, took one for him-

self, then went to the table and poured three drinks, bringing two back for the lieutenant and himself.

"I guess there ain't—" he caught himself smilingly— "isn't—much more to tell, Harry. I know you're surprised about Bethann Radford and me and my daughter, but it was a secret and I couldn't tell anybody about it," Luther said.

Bledso thought, I'll bet you couldn't. And me afraid to step in and make a play for Claudia Holliman. Aloud, he said, "It did come as a surprise, after all the time we'd spent together, to find that instead of a bachelor, Joel Harris and I were camping out with a family man."

"Hey!" Thorpe's voice boomed out of the bathroom. "Bring me a canteen cup of that local hogdip, will you?"

Bledso got up, dropped some ice into the drink Luther had poured earlier, and took it to him. Thorpe came into the room, bath towel wrapped about his hips, seemingly much refreshed, bringing what was left of the drink with him. Thorpe finished it, turned to the table, and poured another. Bledso said, "Watch it, Ed, if you want to be clearheaded when you leave for the mansion tonight. That stuff is made strictly for us rebels who've been raised on it from childhood and know how to handle it."

Thorpe snorted. "Hell, man, I'm a product of the wild and woolly prohibition days. Anybody who could swallow that barnyard and bathtub poison and stay alive can take this stuff on without even whispering. Besides, this is the only way I can make myself stand the crap we had to listen to out there today without vomiting. 'Every man a hero!' Heroes! Jesus Christ Almighty! I wish I had a dollar for every man who shook himself to pieces being honestly scared, instead of a hundred dollars for every 'nerveless, courageous boy who looked bravely into the muzzles of enemy guns and cannon without fear.' What a lot of unadulterated bull—" He turned to Luther. "How in hell were you able to stand it all that time, Luther? I hear you got the same dose for a steady diet every day for a couple of months."

He downed the drink and threw the empty glass across the room to Bledso. "Fill 'er up, buddy. This is my last bender before I return to the world of sanity. Sanity-on-the-Hudson. Where my wife and two kids live in a nice home in a safe suburban area with a jazzed-up neon shopping center, a dull garden club and P.T.A., and where, when a guy uses a word like 'prohylactic,' most of the people think he's talking about a toothbrush." Bledso handed him the drink, another for Luther. "Come on there, Dorman," Thorpe said, "let's us

'nerveless, courageous boys,' us goddamned dirty, lousy heroes drink up fearlessly."

Luther got off the bed and began to sip his drink, feeling little desire to drink with the colonel. He eyed Thorpe with some apprehension, believing now that he could finally place his attitude in a recognizable category, since he had not included Bledso in the invitation to join him in the drink.

Thorpe noticed the hesitation in Luther and said, "Well, come on, hero, how about it? Show a little more spirit in your drinking, will you? Or are you afraid of the stuff?"

Luther put the drink down on the glass-topped dresser, picked up a cigarette, and lighted it. He turned back to Thorpe and said quietly, "Look, Colonel, do I owe you anything I forgot to pay you before I left Germany?"

Thorpe caught the mild sting of rebuke in Luther's voice and said, "Well, for Christ Almighty's sake, Luther, you don't think you really won that medal all by yourself, did you?"

"No. I never did think that, Colonel. A dozen other men helped me to win it that night. But you weren't one of them, were you? So what's your big beef?"

Thorpe was pouring another drink, gulping at it. Luther saw the troubled look on Bledso's face, concerned, uncomfortable in this new, tense atmosphere. He seemed to be trying to catch Thorpe's attention silently, but Thorpe was finishing his drink. Luther, now inflamed with the topic, kept adding fuel. "So what the hell would you know about what happened up there in that forest, Colonel?" He said it slowly, allowing the minimum amount of insolence to creep-into his words.

Thorpe finished his drink and eyed Luther coldly. "Well, boy, if you want it, you can have it," he said witheringly. "Maybe you wouldn't know that the general—" he began, when Bledso interrupted.

"Can I freshen your drink, Ed?" he said, moving between Thorpe and Luther, picked up the bottle as though to pour a drink into the colonel's glass. Thorpe put the glass down and walked over to where his clothes were spread out on the bed. He seemed almost completely sobered by the quick, angry exchange with Luther, who stood only two or three steps behind Thorpe, the liquor beginning to emphasize his belligerence. "Well, how about it, Colonel?" he persisted. "How would you know what happened up there in the forest?"

Thorpe was pulling on his trousers, stuffing his shirt down inside

them. Without looking at Luther he said, "I don't have to know what happened up in the forest, Sergeant. I know what happened at Division Headquarters. Another thing I know is that a hero can be manufactured just as easily in a Division Headquarters as in a battle or on a patrol in a German forest or any other place."

"And just what the hell does that mean, Colonel?" Luther asked angrily. *Let it come out now*, he thought. *If he knows anything, it better come out here in this room with just the three of us to hear it, instead of downstairs somewhere so everybody else will know.*

Thorpe did not stop with his dressing. He began to loop his tie around his neck as he said, "I'll answer you in a quotation whose author I can't remember, or his exact words, Sergeant. It goes something like this: 'Many heroes are created by popular demand or necessity, sometimes of the scantiest, flimsiest materials available; such as the apple that William Tell did not shoot from his son's head, the ride that Paul Revcre did not finish, the flag that Barbara Frietchie never waved.'"

"So?" Luther threw the one word at Thorpe, who had his back turned now as he peered into the mirror to adjust his tie properly, at the same time keeping an eye on Luther in the glass.

"So I'll say this much more. You go ahead and wear your medal and take your bows and salutes and the homage due a great national hero. But for the love of Jesus Christ, Sergeant, don't try to make me swallow the crap the newspapers and magazines have written and gushed about it. I wasn't in the forest, no. But I was in the place and on the spot when the medal was *manufactured* for you. Manufactured by a nice, egotistical man who wanted to bring a permanent, living souvenir home to his favorite state. Manufactured, complete with two eyewitnesses among those twelve men who allegedly gave their statements before they died. How do you like that, Sergeant? We even brought two dead men back to life long enough to give their statements because Army regulations say that there have to be at least two eyewitnesses to the heroic deed before a man can be recommended for the Medal of Honor.

"Now if you don't want to break this thing publicly, you just shut your goddamned mouth and keep it shut. I'll keep quiet only because I don't want to embarrass the general. But I don't want to hear anything more about it from you because I don't *need* to be a hero to my wife and kids and friends and relatives. If that's what *you* need, take it and go in peace, brother, but don't try to make me believe it."

Thorpe turned away from Luther, standing loosely, uncomfort-

ably. He picked up his glass, then put it down again. Luther stood stock still in the center of the room, head down. Bledso got up and started for the door.

"Look, boy," Thorpe said now with more kindness in his voice, "why don't you just forget it? Most of it was the liquor talking and I'm sorry. I mean that. Now—"

Luther went into the bathroom and closed the door. Quietly, Bledso handed Thorpe his battle jacket, helped him into it, the Silver Star ribbon above three rows of battle-starred ribbons.

"Let's go," Bledso said quietly. "I think he'd just as soon be alone."

Luther did not go to the governor's mansion for the celebration ball. In the morning, after having had a pot of coffee sent up, he picked up the phone and said to the operator, "Suite 600."

In another moment he heard a receiver at the other end click and he waited for Marcus to speak. Suddenly he remembered Marcus's words of the night before— "*Don't bother to phone me. I'll probably be up late tonight and sleep in tomorrow morning*"— and began to replace the receiver

"Hello," he heard Marcus's gruff voice.

Luther hung up quietly.

As they neared Regis, Luther began to feel better, as though he had escaped from some danger, having sensed that something might well have happened there in Chancellor to explode his entire world; that having remained away from the nighttime festivities had somehow saved him from public exposure. That morning he had tried to reach Harry Bledso at his father's house, but the colored butler took the call and informed him that Mr. Bledso had driven Colonel Thorpe to the airport to catch the noon plane. He felt safer then. By noon Marcus had called him for lunch, after which they caught the one o'clock train for Regis.

Bethann was home when Newton drove them there from the station, but she did not come downstairs. Marcus went out shortly afterward, presumably to his weekly poker game or to chat with some of his political cronies, Luther thought. It was early, eight-thirty, and Luther was far from tired or sleepy. He went out to the garage, got the car out, and drove to a filling station that had a public phone. He dialed Ruth-Rachel's number, heard it ring four times before the voice of Lutie Hagen croaked, "Who is it? What do you want?"

He hung up and started back toward the Hall, then decided to drop in on Carrie. He pulled the car into the driveway, saw the gray Dodge sedan standing in front of the porch, a light in the front room. He parked behind the Dodge and walked around to the back door, entered the kitchen and found Carrie there, getting ready to pour tea into two cups.

She turned in surprise, put the teapot down. "Hello, Luther," she greeted him with a smile and quick embrace. "I didn't know you were back from Chancellor. Did you have a good time? We read all about the parade in this morning's *Herald*. It had your picture there on the stand with the governor and your general and even Mr. Marcus behind you all."

"Who's the visitor?" he asked, nodding toward the front room.

She pursed her lips into a small smile. "Fred Archer," she said.

He smiled, eyebrows arched upward. "The same Fred Archer?"

"The very same."

He patted her shoulder. "Where's he?" indicating Jud's room.

"Asleep. You want to come in and say 'Hello' to Fred?"

"Sure. Sure. Why wouldn't I want to meet my future brother-in-law?" he teased.

Carrie blushed prettily. "Luther, don't you dare—"

He turned her around to face the hallway and patted her backside. "You be careful now, girl. Man gets you's going to be getting a lot of woman and he might not be able to hold himself back until — Maybe I ought to talk to him first and find out just what he's—"

"*Luther!*" she whispered fiercely.

"All right. All right, honey." He laughed. "I'll behave."

5. May, 1946

Drinking was much heavier than during the prewar days. Gambling and prostitution had increased. The once-small, almost unnoticeable narcotics trade was expanding. Marriage and divorce rates climbed and there was an understandable restlessness that, it was said, would pass when the returned veterans would get back to their jobs in town, in the fields, on the farms. When citizens protested to the sheriff because of the increased crime rate, incidence of disorder, drunkenness, street fights, and the laxity of his deputies in the matter of arrests and crime prevention, Sheriff Bartly took the criticism blandly in his stride.

"Them boys been doin' one hell of a job riskin' their lives to save ourn, yourn, an' mine, an', by God, they're entitled to blow off some steam an' smoke. Just like you-all done yourselves after World

War I. Sho, they just a little high-spirited an' kickin' up their heels, but they'll settle down in a little while. Just like you an' me did after the other one."

Bartly had his hands full keeping Hessie Loomis from making wholesale raids on Buckeytown. "You keep to hell out a there for a while, Hessie," Bartly told his chief deputy in no uncertain terms. "Them niggers got plenty of money left in their jeans, just like the white boys. An' they're goin' a spread it around on whiskey an' women an' gamblin' an' other necessities they ain't been gettin' regular, an' there's no sense in sendin' them out of the county to spend it. All the money that's kept in Regis, we gettin' our share of it."

"I just don't like them niggers gettin' rambunctious an' undoin my work over there," Loomis complained.

"Don't you worry none, Hessie, boy. There'll be women left over for you," Bartly cackled. "B'sides, I don't hear you complainin' none when you get your share of the take every month."

"I'd still like to take—"

"You listen to me, Hessie," Bartly's voice cut across Loomis's resistance. "If you got a brain left in your head, an' I think you do, you just better remember one thing: The Army trained them niggers as well as our white troops. They know how to use guns and bayonets and every other way of takin' care of themselves. You get to ridin' a mite too high in your saddle and you liable to find yourself layin' on the ground with a government issue .45 or a 30-30 slug in your belly. Best you let things cool off by themselves for a while. You'll get your innings later on when the climate gets a lot cooler."

Robbie Tilebin came back to Buckeytown, discharged from the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C.

Paul Tullis returned from the separation center at Camp Gillespie and was back at work for Johnny Norris. Luther met him in the Square one day after lunch at the Regis Hotel. Their greeting was friendly and after a minute or two of "Army buddy" talk, the conversation became local.

"I didn't see you up in Chancellor with the unit," Luther said cautiously, remembering that Tullis had been an orderly in the Division Headquarters where he had first (and last) seen Thorpe in Germany.

"Shuhl" Paul exclaimed. "I seen you, though. I was marchin' along and we get that 'Eyes, *right!*' and I seen you standin' up there with ol' General Bentley an' the governor an' old man Radford— No, I

guess you didn't see me. Weren't no reporters or photographers down there where we were."

"You got any plans in mind, Paul?"

"Well, I made a good deal with Johnny. Sounds to me like things goin' a open up real big around here. Instead of me just drivin' a truck, I'm goin' a be in charge of a crew of drivers, dispatchin' the runs, checkin' 'em in an' out, warehousin' the supplies. Goin' a have my own setup at the truckin' garage." He grinned broadly. "'Cordin' to Johnny, I kinda got it made."

"Say, that's great, Paul. If I can do anything for you—"

Paul grinned. "There might be, Luther, seein' you're almost a Radford yourself now."

There was a silence between them and Luther studied Tullis in an effort to decide whether Paul was being envious or his old, sarcastic self. Or, he thought with sudden fear, does he know something? Something that Colonel Thorpe knows—something he might have picked up around Division Headquarters. He heard Tullis's voice churning. "Heard you an' Miss Bethann Radford been married in secret since before the war started," he added with a sly grin.

"That's right, Paul."

"Now ain't you the close-mouthed one not even to mention a thing like that. Seems like a man had him a woman like Miss Bethann he just couldn't help mouthin' it around. Like ol' Dale used to talk about his Ruth-Rachel. An' all the time you just sittin' back with a wife of your own an' a daughter an' not sayin' a single word. Not even showin' a picture of either one of 'em around."

"Well, Paul, you see, when we got married I promised I'd keep it a secret until I got back. 'Course, the baby coming along like that sort of changed things back here—"

"But not until after you come home." There was another uncomfortable silence—uncomfortable for Luther, but Tullis was grinning with obvious enjoyment. Suddenly, he changed the subject. "I didn't get to see Lieutenant Bledso up there in Chancellor. He livin' up there like he did before the war?"

Luther turned away to light a cigarette, feeling Tullis's eyes on him. He drew on the cigarette several times before he replied. "He comes from there, but I don't know if he's going to settle there. Why?"

"Oh, I thought I might run up an' see him just for old time's sake. He an' Colonel Thorpe an' me, we were pretty friendly. Him bein' a lawyer in Chancellor an' his daddy bein' a judge, he might be a good man to know."

"Bledso? What good can he do you from up there?"

"Well, you never know. I might be operatin' around there for Johnny. Besides, I'd just like to sit around an' talk with him, now he's a civilian again. I liked him an' Thorpe."

"Thorpe?"

"Sure. He was real nice, for a Yankee. Always kiddin' around with Bledso about the South an' who won the War Between the States an' about the Old Man always lookin' for to manufacture himself a Big Hero to take back home after the war was over. You know, just horsin' around like—"

Luther stared directly into Tullis's face now and saw that behind this gay chatter lay something deeper, more serious and more dangerous than the lightness of his tone implied. He dropped the cigarette and stepped on it, looked up again at Tullis.

"All right, Paul. I see you got some kind of a purpose in what you're saying, so why don't you just quit beating around the bush and have it out in the open and save us both a lot of conversation?"

Tullis grinned obscenely and looked around him as though to make sure there were no eavesdroppers. "Well," he began, "I wouldn't want this to go no further—"

"The hell you wouldn't. That's exactly why you waited here for me, so come on and spread it out in the open where we can both see it."

"Well, now, Luther, I got a lot of reason to believe that you ain't no more entitled to be wearin' that pretty little blue ribbon than I got to be wearin' it."

"Okay. If that's what you think, let's hear you back it up with more than just a lot of hot-air talk."

"Listen, Luther, that ain't no way to talk to an old buddy. After all, you wasn't no more than me before the war. Less, if anybody was to know the whole truth."

"So what's that got to do with what we're talking about?"

"So I figure if we're old Army buddies; we got to look out for each other now we're civilians an' back home again."

"Look, Tullis, come on and get it off your chest. Just what are you asking me to do for you?"

"Just this, old buddy." The sarcasm in his last words was pointed and heavy. "You up there ridin' so high an' mighty right now, you're a little hard to see. What I want to make sure is that our old friend, Hogsnout Bartly an' that son-of-a-bitch of a nigger-rapin' deputy of his, Hessie Loomis, keep their hands off me an' my boys. You bein' ol' man Radford's favorite son-in-law, I figure you could maybe get him to say his piece for me comes the time I get in trouble with the local law."

Luther looked up with incredulity on his face. "What are you talking about? You know damned well, just like I do, that Bartly and Loomis know the score, that they're the big wheels in the syndicate. You know that, don't you? So why would Loomis or Bartly pull you or your boys in when they'd only be taking money out of their own pockets doing it?"

Tullis grinned. "You makin' out you don't know what was goin on? Or maybe you really didn't know?"

"What?"

"Well, I'll gamble you didn't know. After all, you were new to the whole thing when the war broke out. All right, I'll spell it out for you. In the first place, your ol' daddy-in-law, Marcus Radford, an' I don't care what anybody else says, is the top man in the whole syndicate. That's right, Luther, he owns the syndicate. Hell, he *is* the syndicate. In the second place, Johnny used to once in a while run a few truckloads past Loomis an' lick off a little bit of extra profit for him an' his brother Tam. Now, I figure that if I can run a few truckloads a week past Loomis, that extra bonus money would be just as easy for me to spend as it would for Old Hogsnout, or Loomis, or even ol' man Radford. If any of my boys or me got caught, I'd like to know I could count on my ol' Army buddy, Luther Dorman, to get his daddy-in-law to rake ol' Hogsnout or Loomis over an' get 'em off my back. Now—" he grinned again—"I figure that the extra I make that away would kind of be like gettin' my share of that blue ribbon they gave you. That ain't askin' too much, is it?"

Luther bit his lips. "All right, Paul, I'll see what I can do for you if you ever get picked up, but don't count on too much. I don't know that what you say about my—uh—father-in-law is true, but maybe I can go to him and ask him a favor in case anything happens." He shook his head in doubt.

"You make sure that when you talk to him, he does more than just listen, Luther, else I might forget and make the mistake of tellin' folks how heroes get manufactured when a general feels like he needs one to bring home to show off like a pet raccoon. Some people around here an' up in Chancellor might even believe me."

6.

As the months passed, the loneliness of exclusion began to weigh heavily on Luther Dorman. He would escape frequently to a rendezvous with Ruth-Rachel, go occasionally to Carrie's, have a drink with some of his former acquaintances in the back of Tam's pool-room, or even spend a few moments with Johnny Norris when

Johnny wasn't too busy with the multiple duties of the expanded operation he had taken on. Carrie's newly awakened friendship with Fred Archer had taken a turn from the casual to the serious, and she had become suddenly filled with the kind of small talk and energetic girlish chatter that annoyed rather than pleased him, her actions like those of a much younger girl instead of a woman in her thirties who was interested in a widower with two children.

In the town there was a superficial friendliness extended him, but no closeness to go with it. Everyone knew him, either as the "town hero" or as Marcus Radford's son-in-law. They spoke to him or called out to him in passing, but once the initial greeting had been tendered and responded to, there was nothing but the same old emptiness. He missed Harry Bledso, who had replaced Dale Hagen in his mind and feelings as his "best friend," and until the night Thorpe got drunk in Chancellor and shot his mouth off, had begun to feel much of his old insecurity evaporating and a return of some of the confidence Bledso and Harris had inspired in him on that seemingly endless bond tour. Without Bledso, it was gone and he missed it, needed it. Tullis's presence didn't help matters.

At Radford Hall he had no feel of belonging. His was an inferior status, far below that of even gardeners or handymen who were forever painting and repairing or helping Sudie and Newton with the heavier household chores; far below that of Tandy, the laundress who came three days each week to bring a storehouse of gossip to the Hall from Buckeytown and the white homes in which she labored on the other three days of her working week, "toting" home with her many articles of old clothing and numerous parcels of food in exchange. Certainly his stature was infinitesimal when compared to that of the two old servants who were practically "family" and could, therefore, venture opinions on the most intimate and personal matters that would have been taken as grossly bad taste coming from Luther.

Bethann's attitude remained one of necessary tolerance, one that said clearly, "keep your distance and we will have harmony." He tried on several occasions to discuss the "peace at any price" relationship with her, since it was growing as distasteful to him as it had been all along with her; but Bethann would simply smile in pity, in the same way she would for a poor animal that had become trapped and could not extricate itself, yet offered him no way out, refusing to discuss the subject at any length. "This was your and Daddy's doing," she would reply. "If you want to undo it, suppose you go and have a nice long talk with him."

It was no good, he decided.

Not here at the Hall, or in town, no longer at Carrie's where the atmosphere was too—happy—with talk of nothing but Fred and his two daughters—all combining to give him an inexpressible feeling of being completely alone, as if a door had opened suddenly and the entire world had walked out leaving him to himself. Only with one person did he experience a feeling of being welcome: Ruth-Rachel. And Lutie Hagen was making it more and more difficult for them to meet and go off together. Ruth-Rachel was pressing him into a situation he didn't know how to cope with. She wanted to get out of Lutie's clutches, was afraid that if she took a job of any kind, Lutie would, as she had before, cause enough commotion to have her fired. As yet, Luther was in no position to pay her expenses or give her an allowance. Consequently, he urged her to wait.

"For how long, Luther? How long you think I can put up with this?"

"Until I can work something out. You put up with it this long, didn't you? And without me here. You can put up with it just a while longer while I work something out."

"Work what out?"

Exasperatedly: "I don't know what. But being where I am, there's some kind of opportunity and that's what I'm watching for."

Ruth-Rachel took this vague promise glumly.

How much was it worth, this thing he had planned and worked at so hard to bring about—all against Carrie's warnings and pleadings? Married to a woman who felt less for him than for a Negro servant or field hand. Whom could he blame when he himself had forced it all to come about? He had sought for equality and for a very short while thought he might even share that equality with Marcus and his friends and associates; and with Bethann; but somehow, deep inside, he knew that this false hope could never materialize.

He would sit in the small office beside Marcus's at the bank and wonder if he dared suggest to Marcus that he could be bought off. How? And for how much, he wondered. How much would it be worth to Marcus to be rid of him? To Miss Bethann? His daydreams had at various times set the amount at \$5000, and when he had gotten used to that amount, would edge the sum up to a hazardous \$10,000. He thought of the money in terms of Ruth-Rachel and where they could go, what they could do with that much money; but the bubble would burst when he realized that even \$15,000, if

it was worth that much to get rid of him, wouldn't last forever. And then what? He knew the answer to that question. He would lose Ruth-Rachel to another, someone who had the money to give her the things she would have gotten used to on *his* money. It was a trap, he thought bitterly, and he was caught in it. But he realized that the trap was of his own making. Living in the finest house in this part of the state: a mansion; not a home. Married to a wife who was no wife to him and to whom he was no husband, of whom he had had much more before his "marriage" to her than after; father in name to a "daughter" he was not permitted to touch, talk to, or even approach; son-in-law to a man who had little use for him other than the fact that he had supplied a name for his daughter's illegitimate child—and this for a weekly salary. One hundred dollars a week, paid to him in cash each Saturday morning. Not by check as the other employees were paid, but in cash in one of the bank envelopes. Like graft. Or blackmail. One hundred dollars that he was sharing with Ruth-Rachel now that the money he had brought home was gone.

What next, he wondered with bitterness and self-pity

In August of 1946 he visited Carrie one night and learned that her jubilant mood had to do with Fred Archer. "He asked me to marry him," Carrie said, her eyes starlit with the happiness in her.

Luther smiled happily in return. "That's great, Carrie. I know you want it, so I'm for it all the way, just in case you want my consent, which I know you don't. When is it going to be?"

"I don't know, Luther. We've got a few things to iron out before we can talk about setting a date."

"What things?"

"Well, things like—Pa. Things like where we'll live with Fred's two girls."

"Fred's doing all right at Frank Beal's, ain't he?"

"That's something else we'll have to work out. Frank's been after a buyer to sell out to so he can retire and go on up to Trumbull to live with his daughter and son-in-law. If Fred could swing it, we wouldn't have any problems because the store can support one family just fine. Fred has a little over \$2500 saved up, but it'll take another \$5000 to swing it; and Fred doesn't think he can borrow anywhere near that much from the bank. Problem is that Frank wants the \$7500 in cash."

"Seventy-five hundred?" Luther repeated.

Carrie nodded. "All he's asking for is the dollar cost of the stock

Fred took the inventory himself and it came to over \$10,000, but Frank is so anxious to get a buyer he said to call it an even \$7500." She shrugged in defeat. "I guess it might just as well be \$75,000 as \$7500 if you haven't got it," she added.

"Now don't you go giving up so easy, Carrie. You haven't forgot you got a brother who once told you that when he got back he was going to make everything right for you, have you? You just rest on it until you hear from me. I'll let you know something in a few days." He smiled and put an arm about her reassuringly, and the frown evaporated from her face and she smiled as she reached up to kiss him.

"I didn't want to ask you, Luther, but it means a whole lot to me. To us."

"I know it does, honey. Don't you start worrying about it yet. You wait till you hear from me before you do."

The next afternoon when Marcus returned to his office after a lunch in the Regis Hotel dining room, Luther was waiting in his private office, lounging on the leather sofa. Marcus looked down on Luther quizzically. "Something you wanted to see me about, Luther?" he asked.

"I thought I'd like to talk to you if you can spare me a few minutes of your time."

It was curious that Luther no longer had a name for the man he once respectfully addressed as "Mr. Radford." To call him that now would seem to be overly formal; to call him "Dad," as Marcus had once suggested, seemed too familiar a phrase for one of Luther's humble station. He solved the problem by using neither the formal nor the familiar.

The day had gone from warm to hot, and Marcus removed his coat and loosened his tie, sat in the big chair behind his desk, and carefully rolled up the sleeves of his fine white shirt with all the elegance that befitted this tall, well-built man who, Luther guessed, would be well into his fifties, but scarcely showed it. This was the man who, one year ago, had made it clear—very clear—that he wanted Luther to marry his daughter, had hinted of even bigger things that might come by their association (his and Marcus's) in some political sense. But thus far Marcus had shown no inclination to take advantage of the prestige of Luther's Medal of Honor in any political way; nor had he given Luther anything more than the office in the bank next to his own, the freedom to come and go as he

pleased, and the distinction of being the son-in-law of Regis County's leading citizen.

Every Saturday morning before he arrived at the bank, someone—he never had found out who exactly—placed the bank envelope with five twenty-dollar bills in it on his desk. Salary, bonus, or allotment. For a wedding gift he had received a similar envelope that contained the deed to the Dorman cottage and the single acre of ground upon which it sat. No more. Even the car he drove was still registered in Marcus Radford's name.

"What was it you wanted to see me about, Luther?" Marcus asked now.

Luther sat up straight and faced Marcus boldly. "I want to borrow \$5000," he said firmly.

Marcus stared for a moment before a small smile of amusement settled over his face. "Five thousand dollars? That's a right good sum of money. You planning to go into some kind of business, Luther?"

"No. And I know it's a sight of money. But I'd like to borrow it just the same."

"Well, now, I don't know," Marcus hedged. "You want to give me a reason why you want it? I guess I'm entitled to hear that, don't you think?"

"I want to give it to Carrie. She wants to get married."

"Carrie married?" Marcus asked in surprise.

Luther bristled and his tone evidenced some ire. "Don't you think —?" he began.

Marcus said quickly, "Now don't go taking offense, Luther. You know how I've felt about Carrie all these years. Like she was—"

"I been wondering for a long time now just how you felt about Carrie," Luther said in a tone that left no doubt as to his meaning.

Marcus bristled. "I don't think I like the tone of that, Luther. It has an air of accusation in it that isn't in very good taste."

"I'm sorry you taken it that way," Luther replied coolly.

"Listen to me, Luther," Marcus said with rising heat in his voice. "You walk in here and tell me you want to borrow \$5000. Let's forget for the moment why you want to borrow it. For the bank to loan you that much money, you'd have to put up—"

"I wasn't asking the *bank* to lend it to me," Luther said pointedly. "I'm asking *you* to lend it to me so I can give it to Carrie. She and Fred Archer want to get married and Fred wants to buy Frank Beal's hardware business. He's got \$2500 saved and needs the \$5000 balance. Frank wants cash, so if Fred can't raise it himself

in a short time, somebody else will get it and then Fred will be back where he started, clerking for somebody else. I want to give it to them to get them started."

"I see," said Marcus. "Well, Luther, there isn't much I wouldn't do for Carrie. After all, she helped raise Bethann when my wife died, and spent a lot of her life at the Hall. I look on her almost as I would—well, like a daughter, I guess."

"Does that mean you'll lend me the money?"

"Well, we could say there's a strong possibility." Marcus smiled.

Luther got up to leave, an inner feeling of having achieved a progressive step up his personal ladder of success. "Thank you very much," he said. "I'd like to give it to her in a couple of days so they can go ahead and plan to buy Frank Beal out."

"It can be arranged, Luther. Wait just a minute before you go. I'd like to talk to you about something else."

Luther's heart began beating faster now. This is it, he thought. Maybe he's going to use this to buy me off. For how much? If he asks, "How much?"—what will I tell him? If he says he'll give me the \$5000 for Carrie if I give Bethann a divorce for it, what will I say? I can't sell out that cheap. I wouldn't have a dime for me and Ruth-Rachel. I'd be crazy. . . .

He heard Marcus's voice penetrate into his thoughts. "You've been married to Bethann about a year now, haven't you, Luther?"

So it *was* what he had in mind, Luther thought. Aloud, he said, "About."

"And it hasn't worked out at all, has it?"

"I guess," Luther bluffed, "it all depends on how you look at it."

Marcus grinned lightly, shook his head. "Come now, boy," he said pleasantly, "you can't fool everybody about a thing like that. Fact is, I don't think you're fooling anybody. Not me, not yourself, not the servants or your sister—"

Luther sat waiting, unwilling to support the statement he knew was true. After a slight pause Marcus said, "It's not much of a life being married to a—well, a stranger, is it? Not for you *or* Bethann. Now why don't we admit the whole thing was a mistake and do the right and honorable thing about it? I've always been fond of you and your sister, Luther, and I'll see you don't suffer by it."

A light of eager hope leaped into Luther's mind. "How do you mean that?" he asked.

"Well, I could arrange an easy, well-paying job on the county—"

"Like sheriff?" Luther interrupted slyly.

Marcus waved this aside impatiently. "Luther," he said with

some exasperation, "you've got to get out of your mind the things people like your friend Bledso put there. A job is one thing and an elective office is another. You've got to understand that—"

Luther interrupted again. "How about the state—?" he began when Marcus slapped his hand down sharply on the desk.

"Luther," he said firmly, "I'll tell you only once more. Nobody from this district goes to the legislature without the blessings of the state leader, the county and district leader; and in Regis County that means me. I've got my own good reasons for picking the men who will represent this district in Chancellor and I've never allowed my judgment to be challenged before. Nor am I about to let it be challenged now. Let's understand that once and for all."

Luther's hands gripped the chair arms, returned Marcus's stare for a few silent moments. Slowly, he eased himself back into the chair, took his package of cigarettes out, extracted one and lit it. Marcus relighted his dead cigar. The tension in the air seemed to lessen.

Marcus said in an easier vein, "I know it was wrong to do what we did in falsifying the records and conspiring in an illegal act, but that's already been done. What we have to do now is to wipe it all out somehow. In some legal way."

"How can we do that?" Luther asked. "It's all in the records at the City Hall. Everybody's been told that Miss Bethann and I were married back in '41. It's all official. The clerk, the judge—"

"What can be done, Luther, can be undone," Marcus said smoothly. "With your cooperation, of course."

Again a small light flickered on in Luther's mind. If he wants or needs my cooperation—

"We needn't disturb the records," Marcus was saying glibly. "They're on the books, let them stay. Everything can go back to where it was before. By a simple divorce. Of course," he added hastily, "all your legal fees and personal expenses will be paid. And there would be a generous—bonus—for you."

So they had reached the crucial point. A bonus. Luther took a last long pull at the cigarette and slowly tamped it out in the ash stand. He looked up into Marcus's eyes and now there was no share-cropper-to-landowner, no poor-boy-to-rich-banker attitude in his voice as he asked bluntly, "How much?"

Marcus noted the change in Luther's tone and an indignant flush began to creep upward from his neck into his face. He leaned forward and snapped, "Fifteen thousand dollars when the divorce is

granted. All expenses paid until then. You can take your choice of Florida, Mexico, or Reno."

Luther thought quickly. "How about the \$5000 I need for Carrie?"

"I'll give that to you apart from the other. You sign a note for it, and when the divorce is granted, I'll return it to you with the other money. Fifteen thousand dollars in cash for you, Luther," he repeated with emphasis.

Luther hesitated, then said, "Can I think it over for a few days?"

"Of course," Marcus replied affably. "When you've decided, let me know and I'll get the \$5000 you want for Carrie."

"I thought I could get that part of it today."

"You can." Marcus smiled. "If you agree to the other conditions, you might even have it by tonight."

"All right then."

"You agree?"

Luther nodded affirmatively. Marcus smiled and said, "Will you be home for supper?"

"If you want me to be there."

"Suppose you do that. I'll take care of it then. I'll make all the arrangements for the other thing with Dan Cornell and let you know when everything is all set. Where would you prefer to go for the divorce?"

"It don't make much difference. Reno, I guess. But it can't be until after Carrie and Fred are married. I won't leave here until then."

"That's good enough," Marcus said. "As long as they don't propose to have a long waiting period between now and then."

"I don't think they mean to wait too long."

With a slight rise in his voice Marcus said, "Well, then, I suppose we can consider the matter settled?"

"Sure," Luther replied. "And—thanks." He got up and went toward his own office with a deep sense of relief.

8.

That night Marcus and Luther sat silently at the dining room table while Newton served their meal.

Jesus! Luther thought. How can he stand it like this? It's like eating in a morgue.

Marcus wondered, Where is she? Upstairs? Out for the evening? I can't ask Newton in front of Luther. He sighed unhappily. It was a mistake. A big mistake. I shouldn't have done this to her, not even

to give Harriet a name. She didn't want it or need it in order to look anybody in the eye. She is a Radford and that's enough for anybody to know without needing an explanation for anything. Now we're farther apart than ever. If we could only talk together. Even now. Now that I've got him practically bought off.

In Luther's eyes Marcus Radford was a man who had everything. The world was his. *How much more does a man like him need when he's got so much*, he thought. And still he knew that Marcus was an unhappy man because of Bethann. Not all the money he had, not even if he had ten times as much, could win back the love of the daughter he had driven from him. And Marcus sat thinking the same thing, reflecting on the emptiness of his life. At any moment that she might decide to do so, she could take Harriet and leave him and Radford Hall and Regis. And if she did this one last thing to him, he did not know what he could do about it, how he would live through it. His life would be at its emptiest, its lowest point.

Somehow, a spoonful at a time, a forkful at a time, they got through the dinner, and Marcus took one of the cigars from the humidor Newton brought to him. Luther noticed with annoyance that the humidor was not offered to himself, even though he never smoked cigars. He reached into his jacket pocket and brought out a single cigarette from the pack, lighted it, and waited. Marcus puffed his cigar to life, drank the small tot of brandy Newton had poured for him, and rose to his feet. Without a word he signaled a finger to Luther and Luther rose and followed him into the study, the room in which he and Bethann had heard the words spoken that made them husband and wife. It was only just, Luther thought now, that it should come to an end here. Marcus went to his desk, opened a drawer, and took out an empty envelope, put it in his inner coat pocket. Luther stood in front of the desk and Marcus pointed to one of the two leather lounge chairs.

"Wait here," he said. "I'll be back shortly."

Luther sat down as Marcus went out, closing the door after him. He heard the older man's footsteps as he mounted the first few steps to the upper floor. He picked up the folded *Herald* that lay on the end table beside his chair and glanced over the headlines of the front page, thumbed through the rest of the paper with little interest. He looked at his watch. Fifteen minutes had passed. He folded the paper and stood up, and at that moment he heard his father-in-law's footsteps again as they came down the last few steps and up to the door. Marcus entered the study and went to

his desk, opened one of the side drawers and took out an oblong piece of paper and began to write upon it. When he finished with this, he looked up and said, "Come here, Luther."

Luther approached the desk and Marcus handed him the pen he had been using, pushed the paper before him, and Luther saw it was a demand note for \$5000, Marcus indicating with his finger where Luther was expected to sign. He bent over the desk and signed the note, pushed it back to Marcus. Now Marcus reached inside his jacket pocket and took out the envelope, substantially thicker now, and handed it to Luther as he picked up the signed note and began to fold it.

"All businesslike and aboveboard," Marcus said with a smile.

But Luther did not return the smile. Very deliberately, he opened the envelope, took out the sheaf of bills, and began slowly to count them out on the desk, one by one. Marcus got up with an angry snort and stalked out of the study slamming the door behind him. When the door was closed, Luther grinned to himself and stopped counting.

9.

Fred Archer's car was in front of the Dorman cottage when Luther arrived a half hour later. He went inside and sat with Fred while Carrie put a pot of coffee on. It was so different now, with Pa knowing that he was to stay in his room when company came, with Fred acting so—well, so at home here. And Carrie. The change in her was remarkable, the lightness in her voice, her step, the preciseness and care in her speech these days, her meticulous appearance and preoccupation with make-up and clothes, the beauty in her that spoke of a woman in love.

Luther talked with Fred about business in general, let Fred carry most of the conversation, feeling a special glow of warmth emanating from the packet of \$5000 he carried in his inside jacket pocket. Then Carrie came into the front room with the coffeepot on the tray with the cups and saucers. When they had finished, Fred glanced at his watch.

"Almost ten," he said. "Got to make sure the girls are tucked in for the night. If I'm not home to see to it, sometimes that colored girl gets careless and lets them stay up all hours. Good night, Luther. Nice seeing you and talking to you again."

Carrie saw Fred to his car while Luther gathered up the cups and saucers and took them back to the kitchen on the tray. Carrie joined him there a few minutes later.

"Sorry if I broke anything up," Luther said. "I wanted to see you tonight and didn't know Fred would be here."

"Here, let me do that," she said. "And don't fret about breaking anything up. There are other nights. Lots of other nights."

"You're real happy about it, aren't you?"

"I am. He's a fine man. We wasted a lot of years we didn't have to." She bent down for the soap powder in the cabinet beneath the sink and Luther caught at her hand. "Let the dishes go for a while, Carrie. I want to show you something important." He led her from the sink to the table and she could sense the urgency in his touch.

"Luther, you didn't—?"

He nodded with a smile. "I told you I would, didn't I?" He took the thick envelope out of his pocket, opened it, and let the bills spill out on the table. "You count it for yourself, honey. It's all there. Five—thousand—dollars. I never had so much money in my own hands at one time in my whole life, let alone money that belonged to me!"

Carrie's eyes widened. "Luther! Oh, *Luther!*" she exclaimed. "Who ever in the world *has?*"

She didn't touch the money, but went to him and put her arms around him and lay her head on his chest. "Oh, Luther, thank you so much, so very much. You don't know what you've done for me. For us."

Luther said soberly, "I think I know." To himself he thought, *If I can get out of this thing with Bethann and take Ruth-Rachel away from Regis, it could be like this with us, like it will be with Carrie and Fred. Only better. I know it will. Ruth-Rachel and me. Ruth-Rachel and me. That's what it should have been all the time.*

He was aware that Carrie had asked him a question.

"What?"

"Where did you get it, Luther, from the bank?"

"No. I got it from Mr. Marcus himself."

"He didn't just give it to you like that, did he?"

"Sure he did. Just like that. When I told him it was for you, he didn't say anything else about it except that he was real glad to hear you were going to get married."

"Well, now," was all Carrie could answer.

Luther said, "You hide this money carefully till tomorrow. Then you put it in the bank for safekeeping until you need it to buy Frank Beal out. I've got to go now."

"Good night, Luther." Impulsively, she reached for him again,

kissed him hard on his mouth. "You've been such a wonderful brother to me. Thanks again and again."

"Shoot, and why not, Carrie? You been the best sister a body ever had."

He drove down County Road toward Lutie Hagen's house, then shot past it and continued on to the small indentation in the road near where the county bus stopped. He flashed his lights twice, then tapped his horn twice. He waited, but she wasn't there. He smoked a cigarette to give her another few minutes to show herself, knowing she probably had been unable to get away without Lutie spying on her, following her. After fifteen minutes he wheeled the car around and headed back to the Hall.

He thought of the question Carrie had asked. *Where did you get it, Luther, from the bank?* referring to the \$5000. And suddenly it struck him that the transaction had been a very curious one.

How did it happen that Marcus had not given him the \$5000 in the form of a check, the normal way to make a loan or a payment of such proportions?

How did it happen that Marcus had given him the money in the study at the Hall, instead of at the bank where their conversation had taken place originally and where the money would have been more readily accessible?

Thinking about it in this way, Luther's imagination became stimulated with more questions. Wouldn't it have been so much easier to have sent for Cass Worden or Miss Abelard and told one of them to bring him \$5000 in cash? Or a cashier's check? Why had he made a special point of having Luther come home for dinner that night, that he must take care of the matter then? In asking the questions and telling him that he would take care of the matter then, Marcus had already made up his mind to let Luther have the \$5000, and if this were so, why go to all the trouble of doing it later at home when it could all have been done right then and there at the bank, even to having Luther sign the note?

The bills Marcus had given him, the hundreds and fifties, he recalled, were worn with use. If the money had come directly from the vaults of the bank, the bills would no doubt have been crisp and new. Luther's next thought brought beads of perspiration to his forehead and he felt the pulsations of his blood as it raced through his veins, pumping hard from his heart. He realized now, and without any doubt whatever, that the money, this cash, had had to come from somewhere within Radford Hall.

It was unreasonable that Marcus would keep large amounts like \$5000 lying around where servants, handymen, and others could stumble over it. If there was \$5000, there might be \$10,000, or \$30,000, or even \$50,000, perhaps.

The thought began to tantalize him. He tried hard to remember back to early evening when Marcus had left him in the study and gone out, closing the door after him. *He turned and went up the stairs, Luther recalled. I heard his footsteps going up the first three or four steps. He went up those steps and that's for sure. Upstairs somewhere is where he's got it hidden, and if it's upstairs, it's got to be in his room! He wouldn't leave it anywhere else except where he could get to it when he wanted it.*

Where would it be? In a safe of some kind? Luther wouldn't know, for he had never been inside Marcus's room, did not know if Marcus occupied one room or more

Where?

Why would Marcus keep so much cash at home? Unless he might need it to make payments to someone after banking hours?

What kind of money could it be, this cash in such large amounts that a man would keep it in his home when he owned a bank and could keep it there?

The obvious answer struck him almost at once.

Marcus Radford was Mr. Big! The head of the syndicate!

When Paul Tullis had suggested this to him, he had thought it too ridiculous to be given another thought. Now it did not seem so ridiculous. This was why Johnny Norris wouldn't tell him who Mr. Big was. *This was payoff money.* Money used to pass along up the line to the capital to pay for protection at the state level. Money that Sheriff Bartly and his deputy, HESSIE LOOMIS, collected and passed on to him, his share of the moonshining operations, the gambling, prostitution, narcotics, and everything else illegal in these parts. It was money that had to be hidden, couldn't be accounted for to the tax authorities, money that had been black-jacked from "party contributors" who got the contracts to build the roads and schoolhouses and other county and state buildings. *Protection payoff money.*

And, Luther reasoned, if he was right in his thinking, then this was why the money was not in crisp, new, identifiable bills, but worn and used and much handled so that they would defy identification. Also, there would be a hell of a lot more than just the mere \$5000 Marcus had taken out of his cache to loan to Luther.

Making me sign a goddamned note for the money he's taking

from the moonshiners and bootleggers, the madams and gamblers and dope pushers! Luther thought indignantly, How about that? Just how the hell about that! The son-of-a-bitch! Making me sign a note for money he's just as good as stealing from the public! Him, Miss Bethann, too, living on money like that and looking down their noses at the rest of the world, giving me and Carrie charity, for Chrissakes, while they live it up like a king and his princess in a fairy tale. Him and his gang, Bartly and Loomis to do his dirty work for him. Everybody bowing and scraping to His Majesty just because he's giving them a job and some money so they can kiss his ass and give him their votes for every little favor he does for them.

Suddenly he felt good and began to laugh aloud. Well, whadayaknow! I'll be go-to-hell if that don't sort of even things up between me and the Radfords, by sure God! And if I ever find where he's got that money stashed away, I got a right to a piece of it as much as he has!

As he drove into the garage and entered the still, darkened house, he thought again, This sure has been one hell of a fine night for the Dormans! By God, it sure has!

Chapter 14

1.

Monday morning brought an unexpected surprise to Luther. When he came into his office there was a letter from Harry Bledso lying on his desk blotter. Seeing the handwritten return address in the corner of the envelope gave him an added lift.

He had spent the entire weekend in frustrating attempts to reach Ruth-Rachel by telephone, haunted their rendezvous without success, until late on Sunday night when Ruth-Rachel was finally able to elude Lutie and meet him at the bus stop—and then only to make her own unhappiness with their situation clear to him.

"I've got to get *away* from her, Luther," she insisted. "I just can't stand it any more. She's getting crazier every day, trailing me around, mumbling after me, threatening to raise a fuss if I so much as walk out of the house, or screaming she'll go to the law and name you publicly as the man I'm carrying on with. I can't even go to the bathroom without her following me. I only got away from her because she thought I was asleep and began to hit the bottle. Right now she's so drunk she can't see or hear any more."

He tried to placate her, reason their situation out for her. "It won't be much longer, honey," he told her with positive assurance. "I'm working on something right now. Just don't do anything to make her raise a public ruckus or she'll spoil everything. And right now, that's a lot."

"When? *When*, Luther?" she demanded impatiently.

And all he could give her to hope on was an almost hopeless, futile, "Soon. Just give me a little more time. Maybe a few weeks. No more."

She became morose then, and when he put his arms around her, she turned from him. Nor did she relent later; and so smoldering resentment for his own failure replaced his earlier elation and passion, and the weekend passed on that unyielding and unsatisfactory note.

Now the letter from Harry Bledso raised his spirits again. He examined it carefully before he slit the envelope, noting the word "Personal" inscribed by pen beneath his typewritten name and address, and he took an added measure of warmth from this.

DEAR LUTHER: (he read)

I must apologize for waiting so long to write you. When you were here last I was sorry you had left for home when I returned from taking Ed Thorpe to the airport. I had hoped you might stay over for a day or two so we could have had a private reunion. With so much confusion, I don't think we had more than a few hours together and then only with others about. Meanwhile, the months have flown by and I've been busy, just as I know you must be.

How about coming up for a day or two when you can find the time? I'd like to hear how you are getting along and tell you all about my own work here. If you decide you can make it, please let me know and I will make arrangements to be free.

Sincerely,
HARRY

Luther read the letter slowly, then re-read it, savoring the clear friendliness that emanated from this cold piece of white paper. This was his friend, Harry Bledso, a man of excellent family, education, and culture, for whose name and background even Marcus Radford had shown a high degree of respect. *And after he left here, Luther thought, and the way he buddied up with Thorpe that time in Chancellor, I didn't even think he'd give me the time of day again.*

Already he was wondering how soon would be *not too soon* to write and tell Harry he would come up for a day or two for such a private reunion. Most of the rest of the morning was spent in framing an answer in his mind. He sat at his desk with a pad of paper in front of him and drafted one reply after another until there was a sizable mound of crumpled papers in his wastepaper basket. He settled finally on one that was brief, no more than six or seven lines, saying that Wednesday of the following week would be convenient for him to make the trip to Chancellor, if this would be suitable for Harry.

On Saturday he received a reply from Bledso, saying he would be delighted to hear from Luther as soon as he arrived in Chancellor the following Wednesday. He gave Luther a phone number to call.

Luther's first act after he had been shown to his room at the Randolph was to put in a call to Harry. A woman's voice answered.

"Office of Internal Revenue," she said.

Luther hesitated, puzzled. The woman repeated the words again. "Is this Chancellor 8464?" he asked.

"That's right," the woman's voice agreed.

"Is there—is Mr. Bledso there? Mr. Harry Bledso?"

"One moment, please. I'll see if Mr. Bledso is in his office. May I tell him who is calling, please?"

Luther gave his name and in another moment heard Harry Bledso's voice.

"Hello, Harry," he replied to Bledso's warm greeting. "For a minute I thought I had the wrong number. I thought you gave me your office number in your letter."

"I did," Bledso laughed. "I'll explain it when I see you. You at the Randolph?"

"Room 428."

"I'll walk over right now. You're just in time for lunch and I'm only around the corner."

In the hotel dining room Bledso explained the mystery that was puzzling Luther. "When I passed my bar exams, after putting in eighteen to twenty hours a day with the help of my father and a few friends to coach me on my weaker points, I made it the first time up at bat. But that didn't end my problems. I'd been away for four long years and, besides, there was some talk about appearances. We knew that a number of people might be bringing me cases, important cases, only because they felt that having the son of an important figure like Judge Henry Bledso represent them might be helpful in the matter of influence among other judges.

"Neal Grayson, who is a local man and head of the Office of Internal Revenue, and also a close friend of father's, suggested that I take a job on the legal staff of his office for a while. Meanwhile, I could go over my law books and pick up what I'd lost in the four years I'd been in the Army. I'd be gaining valuable experience and a certain amount of practice while I was brushing up on civil, property, and criminal law. So, for all these past months, I've been working for Uncle Sam again, although not in uniform this time."

They chatted for a while about personalities they had known in common. Bledso had had several letters from Joel Harris, friendly notes, and had answered them; and then one day there was a note

and he had put it to one side. When he looked for it a few weeks later, it was gone, and gone with it was Harris's address; and that had been it.

"Tullis came from your neck of the woods, didn't he? Paul Tullis? Did he get home all right?"

"Paul? Sure, he got home all right."

"What is he doing now?"

"He—" Luther hesitated, the words "Internal Revenue" flashing back into his mind. "He drives a truck," he finished.

"Oh. I think you mentioned once that you drove a truck in Regis for a while. You and Hagen. For a—moonshining syndicate, I think you said."

Luther nodded. "Just a little. Mostly I worked a piece of ground, twenty-two acres or so."

"And how is your job at the bank, Luther?" Bledso asked.

Luther began to answer, then stopped abruptly, unable to think of a plausible reply, one that might invite questions to which he would have the correct answers. "Okay," he said finally. "I help my father-in-law. I'm a sort of—special assistant to him."

"You don't sound too happy about it," Bledso said with a light smile.

Luther let the comment pass. "You know," Bledso continued, "this Neal Grayson is a wonderful chap. You'd like him. One night he was telling us something that brought your father-in-law's name into it."

Luther looked up with casual interest. "It seems," Bledso went on, "that Neal's father was the late Gustavus Grayson, who once ran for the governorship. Neal was a youngster in his early teens then, but he can still remember how Marcus Radford went stumping against his father all over the state, calling for the people to vote for his opponent. The papers later claimed it was the Radfords, Justin and Marcus, but mostly Marcus, who took Gus Grayson out of the political arena for good. He never could make a comeback after Marcus got through with him."

"And so I guess he's got no use for Marcus Radford," Luther said.

"Well," Bledso smiled, "I don't think Neal is that vindictive a man after all these years. Gus Grayson has been dead for over fifteen years and Neal is in his middle forties and not one to carry grudges. It's odd, though, how coincidences will crop up, even after so many years."

"In what way?"

"Well, Marcus Radford, for instance. Only last month, his name

came up at another discussion, this one in our office. Nothing official yet, of course. Dean Paddock is chief investigator for the Alcohol Tax Unit of the Treasury Department and he's had his men trying to smoke out an illicit distillery operation, probably the biggest in the state, and he was trying to check out some details through our office. We weren't much help to Dean, though."

An uneasy feeling came over Luther as he recognized that Harry Bledso was leading him, trying to make a definite point in his conversation. He had brought out three points in rapid succession. *Marcus Radford. Alcohol Tax Unit and Treasury Department. An illicit distillery operation, probably the biggest in the state.* Luther lit a cigarette to hide the stirring inside him.

"Let's go up to your room, Luther," Bledso suggested. "I think we can talk better there."

"Sure," Luther agreed, adding as they began to rise, "if it's that confidential."

Bledso looked up sharply, then smiled and stood behind Luther, waiting for him to lead the way. He added no more to his previous comment at the moment. In Luther's room they took off their jackets, loosened ties, and relaxed. Luther sat back on the bed with two pillows propped up behind him, Bledso in the comfortable armchair, his shoeless feet crossed at the ankles and stretched out to reach the lower edge of the bed.

"Okay, Harry," Luther said after he'd lit a cigarette and thrown the pack to Bledso, "what's on your mind?"

Bledso smiled again and said, "I'm glad you could make it up here, Luther. It's nice getting together with you again."

Luther returned the smile. "I'm beginning to get the feeling that the invitation wasn't entirely social."

"Well, to be truthful, not entirely."

"Well, then, what's on your mind, Harry?"

Now it was Bledso who hesitated, peering steadily at Luther; his smile faded. He sat up straight in the chair and leaned forward, intent. "Luther, tell me this first: How do you get along with Marcus Radford?"

Luther shrugged noncommittally, let his silence say the words he was reluctant to utter.

Bledso leaned back in his chair and drew deeply on his cigarette. "You could do me a great favor."

Luther said, "If I can, I'll be glad to, Harry."

"I'll have to tell you a few things in confidence, Luther. However, if any of this gets out to certain parties, there's going to be

a noose around my neck and the other end of it in your hands. Or, to put it much more accurately, in Marcus Radford's hands. My legal career could end just—"

"I wouldn't do anything in this world to hurt you, Harry. You're the best friend I've got left in this world. Anywhere. I mean that."

"Thanks, Luther. I was hoping I could count on you. Now listen. For a long time, years, in fact, the Alcohol Tax Unit has been aware that a big moonshining ring, among other things, has been operating out of the Regis area. What made me think of you in connection with this is that you once told me you and Hagen worked for them for a while. These boys working on it haven't been asleep, just handicapped. They've even pinpointed the operation to an area that was once known as Frenchman's Swamp. I'm sure you know it."

Luther: "I know it. The Swamp. It's across the river from Buckeytown."

Bledso: "That's right. On the west side of the Welcome River. As hard and tricky a place to get inside of secretly as it would be to pull a raid on Fort Knox."

"What's all that got to do with Marcus Radford?" Luther asked, masking his own suspicions, or knowledge, in this very same direction.

"There has been some wide conjecture that some kind of a tie-in exists between that ring and your father-in-law. They believe that while he doesn't actually have a hand in operating the stills or the distribution of their manufactured products, he is the man whose protection is needed—and for a heavy price. Also, the Internal Revenue Office has from time to time received word anonymously, from disgruntled gamblers who are not allowed to operate in Regis, or unhappy wives whose husbands drink or gamble too much, that the payoff man is Sheriff Willis Bartly, and that the man sitting on top of him is none other than your esteemed banker-father-in-law. That would make him head of the biggest gambling, prostitution, narcotics, and moonshining ring in the state."

Luther said, "If you people know all that, why don't you just go in like a military expedition? Bring in observation helicopters and guide your men in with walkie-talkies. Hell, there's no Army down there. Just a lot of niggers who'd never put up a fight against any kind of opposition."

Bledso smiled. "No, Luther, we couldn't do it that way. Somebody would be bound to get hurt, and do you have any idea how great public opinion would be against us for declaring war on our own

citizens? You know what the state would do to hamper us in the future if we pulled a deal like that on a politically influential man like Radford? Besides, if we pulled our raids, and even if they were successful, the chances are we couldn't tie a single blessed thing up to Marcus Radford personally."

"Then I don't understand you, Harry. If you big people can't do it, how do you expect little people like me to help you?"

"That's the only thing we *can* count on, Luther, the honest little people in this world like you. And others who know that all the illegal money that Marcus Radford puts his hands on goes into his political maneuverings, the people he puts into the legislature in Chancellor to pass his bills and do his other work for him—aside from the help he gives to perpetuating crime and criminal hierarchies elsewhere. One man with Radford's control can cost the state and the people in it hundreds of millions of dollars every year, rob the state and federal governments of millions more in taxes on the money they make illegally and never report. It takes the little people to start the ball rolling, but once we get what we need, there are other people, the honest legislators and officers of the state and federal governments who will use even the smallest lever to wedge their way up to the biggest ringleader. You could be that wedge, Luther."

"Me? Go up against Marcus Radford?" Luther laughed. "Man, that's one hell of an order. You're talking about tackling the biggest, most powerful citizen in Regis County. If not in the whole state."

Bledso nodded. "Probably in the entire state, Luther. But it can be done, regardless of how rich and powerful he is. All we need is one lead, one that's strong enough to convince our department chiefs that we've got the right man. Once we are able to do that, Internal Revenue will go through records, turn accountants and investigators loose until they know more about Marcus Radford than he knows about himself. If he is our key man, the real syndicate head, he has got to be paying money out to others for the protection he must furnish them. The money is going to someone, somewhere, into a large number of hands. And you can bet your life that none of that money anywhere along the line has been reported as income. There's a lot of it involved, Luther, millions and millions of dollars, and it's got to show up somewhere. All we want to find out is one thing: Is Mr. Marcus Radford what he has been anonymously reported to be, the man at the top?"

"And that's the simple little thing you want me to find out for you?" Luther asked with a quizzical smile.

"I won't try to minimize the difficulty or even the danger in the thing we're asking you to do for us, Luther. It's not simple and it's not little and I don't even know how to advise you to go about doing it. But whatever you can find out for us, dig up that will be useful, might be more than just gossip or rumor. What we're looking for is a bit of proof, no matter how small. Even the tiniest shred of evidence could give us enough to get started on. And if we have that, we'll tear him to pieces."

"How about those anonymous tips you got?"

Bledso shook his head. "They're not proof. We don't even know who sent them in. If we went on that, even if it were true, Radford would have his hired clagues in the legislature crying that Grayson is trying to crucify Radford because he kept Grayson's father from becoming governor. There's that personal angle in it, too, and, above all, Neal wants to avoid that."

Back into Luther's mind came the reminder of the night Marcus gave him the \$5000 in cash. This was the kind of payoff money Harry was talking about; and just as sure as he was of that much, he knew now that there must be a lot more of it hidden in the same place Marcus had gotten the money. Above all else, this was information he would *not* give over to Bledso, would keep for his own use.

"Just what kind of proof do you want, Harry? Marcus Radford wouldn't be dumb enough to let himself be caught making a cash payoff to anybody, or put something in a letter that could be smoked out, would he?"

Bledso said, "Luther, a man who deals in multi-millions *must* keep some kind of records, somewhere, however deeply or safely hidden they are, even if he keeps them in code. On that tremendous scale, it's impossible for a man to rely on his memory. He gets his money from many sources and he has to pay the money out to a great number of people in small and large amounts. He could never operate smoothly otherwise. There are men all over the state, corrupt law men, politicians, suppliers, venders, all types from every walk of life who are involved. He's got to know who and for how much each man is indebted to him, to whom he is indebted. A thing like this can't be accomplished overnight, or in a few months, or without records. It takes years to build a big organization and administer every department.

"But somewhere along the line someone in that organization, big or small, can trip and stub his toe; and then a little clue will pop up. The department has been collecting those little clues for years,

putting the little pieces together. But now we need the bigger pieces. Or perhaps one piece big enough to make the puzzle come to life. If we have someone watching at the proper point, at the exact moment, he might be able to recognize the big clue when he sees it. That's what we need now. Then we'll go after him the same way Internal Revenue went after Mr. Big in Chicago, Alphonse Capone. Nobody could touch him for his bootlegging operations or his muscle-and-murder activities. It had to be the least militant of all the federal services—Internal Revenue."

Luther said, "You think he might have his records tucked away somewhere in the bank vault?"

Bledso shook his head negatively. "I doubt it very much. He might keep most of his cash there because that kind of money looks like any other kind of money. But he wouldn't keep his records there. Somebody might accidentally stumble over them in case Radford were to be taken ill suddenly and put into a hospital and his manager instructed by the bank examiners to go through all records. Another thing, this type of business isn't always conducted during normal office hours, or in public places like banks. He would have to keep a sizable amount of cash elsewhere, possibly with records to check off in making payoffs. Where he would keep such a cache is the big question mark—one you might help us locate."

There was a moment of silence between them, then Bledso said, "Did you tell Radford or your wife that you were coming up to see me?"

"No, but I don't guess it's any secret. It wouldn't be hard for him to find out. I told the bank manager, Cass Worden, that I was coming up to Chancellor for a few days to visit an old Army buddy."

Bledso nodded. "It doesn't matter. I used my personal stationery in writing you so that my connection with the U.S. Attorney or Internal Revenue wouldn't stir anything up if someone there saw it and passed the word along to your father-in-law."

Luther said, "Harry, I can't promise you anything. Not a single thing. But I'll tell you this much: I'll try my best because I've got some kind of a personal interest in this myself. I'll keep my eyes open. If, like you said, Marcus was to trip and stub his toe, you want me to call you? Or your friend, Grayson?"

Bledso took a card from his pocket, a personal card in a script engraving, with his home address and phone number at the bottom. On the back he wrote the number Luther had used earlier: Chancellor 8464. "You can use this number at any time around the clock. There's an operator on duty all night long. If you want me

personally and without any delay, whether it's day or night, no matter who answers, simply repeat the last two digits of this phone number, six-four. When you've done that, just give the message. It will get to me within a matter of minutes and, if you want me to call you back, leave the number where you can be reached. If you want to hold on, the operator will know where to contact me at all times."

Luther smiled. "Agent six-four. Regular cloak-and-dagger stuff."

"Not really. We use it only with special people on special assignment in order to avoid delays in getting through. Neal and I worked out this little code for our special investigators."

For the next two days they spoke little of Marcus Radford, and Luther was happy to spend as much time with Bledso as he could spare away from his work. On the third morning as Bledso drove Luther to the station, the subject came up once again. "We can count on your help, Luther?"

"I'll do my best, Harry. But like I said, I can't promise anything definite."

"I'll be glad to accept even that much. But there's more to the story than just this, Luther."

"What's that?"

"I didn't want to tell you this until after you agreed to come in with us because I didn't want you to think I was using it as a bribe or a reward." Luther looked puzzled. "So far," Bledso continued, "you've heard only my side of the problem without asking me, 'What's in it for me if I help you?'"

Luther said simply, "A friend asks me to do a favor for him, I don't expect anything for that."

"Thanks, Luther. I appreciate your sincerity and friendship, but there's a little more to it than that. If you tip Marcus Radford's apple cart over, you could very well be putting yourself in a bad position in Regis. As a friend, I couldn't expect you to jeopardize your own future without some sort of return. Do you remember the morning we sat in Radford's office and I tried to sound him out about a political office for you?"

"I remember."

"And do you remember that he turned the idea down coldly, how he intimated that anyone who got into political office in *his* county or went up to Chancellor from *his* district did so only with *his* approval?"

Luther nodded.

"Of course, you realize that if we hang this thing on him, he'll be

out of the way as a political figure. With Marcus Radford out of the way, his local henchmen will have to follow. Sheriff Bartly is probably his number two man. That job will be open. And I'm sure I can get some important backing for you up here in Chancellor, particularly with the man who will be chosen by the party to replace Radford. Everybody still remembers Sergeant Luther Dorman and I know I can get General Bentley to endorse you for the office. I'm certain that we can get the governor's endorsement and that of every candidate who will be stumping for office in Regis County.

"Of course," Bledso said cautiously, "the first requirement is that Marcus Radford be exposed, discredited, linked up with his illegal syndicate. It will probably cost him a lot of money in evaded taxes plus fines; also a term in a federal prison, however short or long that might be, and there's no doubt that he will take a lot of people along with him. And his political effectiveness will be over."

He hesitated for a moment, then added, "It could have a disastrous effect on—your marriage."

As Bledso talked, Luther had been nodding in agreement, an exhilaration generated in him by Bledso's suggestion that he would be killing two birds with one stone: revenge himself on Marcus Radford and, if he should want it, election as sheriff of Regis County after Bartly would be thrown out of office. He thought, too, of Hessie Loomis going to prison with Bartly, and this pleased him tremendously. But it was Bledso's last statement, the effect of all this on his marriage to Bethann, that brought an involuntary snort from him.

"Don't you worry about that part of it, Harry," he said. "Whatever happens won't change the situation between me and my wife even a little bit."

"You're sure of that, Luther?"

Luther smiled. "I couldn't be surer of anything in my whole life."

They had come into the station with only seconds to spare. Luther took his bag from the back of the car and extended his hand in farewell. "Don't come in with me, Harry. I'll just have time to make it. Good-by now."

Bledso shook his hand. "Then I can tell Neal you're in, Luther?"

Luther nodded and replied in a low, firm voice, "Sure, Harry. All the way in."

3.

In a simple civil ceremony Fred Archer and Carrie Dorman were married at the Regis City Hall. Luther and Fred's two daughters

were the principal witnesses. Bethann attended, but Marcus was out of town. There would be no honeymoon trip and the first month of their marriage would be spent in Fred's rented house in town while Fred took over complete charge of Beal's—now Archer's—Hardware Emporium. When things were in order, they would move out to the Dorman cottage. Meanwhile, there would be a Negress to take care of Jud Dorman, with Luther and Carrie to look in on him occasionally. Marcus Radford's wedding gift to the couple was a new Ford station wagon.

After the late-afternoon ceremony they had gone back to Fred's house where Frank Beal and other of Fred's friends were gathered to wish the happy couple well. By nine o'clock that night the two girls had been put to bed and Luther, their last visitor, was ready to leave. Fred and Carrie went to the door with him.

"Luther," Fred began, "I want you to know how grateful I am to you for—"

"Please, Fred," Luther replied, "don't let's get started on that, else I might have to embarrass you by telling you I didn't do it for you at all, but for the girl I think more of than anybody else I ever knew. You take good care of Carrie for me and that's all the thanks I'll ever want."

"Oh, Luther," Carrie cried. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Good night, Luther. I wish—I—wish—" She broke it off there. "Good night, honey."

As he walked down the steps to the car, Luther knew what it was that Carrie had tried to wish: that he could be as happy as she was this night; that he could share the love he had in him with someone who loved him as she loved Fred. As he drove along County Road, he could not keep his mind from Fred and Carrie, imagining them together, seeing himself and Bethann as he saw them, then seeing himself and Ruth-Rachel and knowing without even the smallest doubt in his mind that this was the clearer picture. Himself and Ruth-Rachel. He stopped by their usual meeting place at the bus stop near the Hagen cottage, flicked the lights out and on again twice, tapped the horn lightly two times. In a moment he saw her coming toward him from the shadows. He reached over and opened the door and she got in. He turned west on County Road toward the Radford cottage on the Welcome River.

It was a little past one the following afternoon when Luther crossed the Square as he headed toward the bank. Approaching it, he saw Bethann, her back to him as she headed toward Markland's Bazaar. He went to his office, heard Marcus's voice in conversation with

Will Bartly through the slightly opened communicating door, and paused thoughtfully for a moment. He went out again, told Miss Marshall he had a sudden headache and would be out getting some air, then went through to the parking lot and got into his car. By the time he reached the Hall, he saw Newton, the young Negress, Lolly, beside him, pulling out of the back driveway in the station wagon, on their way into town to do the usual household errands, then pick Harriet up at her nursery school on their way back. They would be gone at least two hours, he knew.

Perfect timing, Luther thought, pleased with himself. With Bethann in town shopping, Sudie would be alone in the house, busy with her kitchen and household duties. He came in through the rear entrance, saw the old Negress bent over her stove, mumbling beneath her breath, glowering at her pots and pans, shuffling back and forth on her loosely slipped feet.

In his room Luther took off his jacket, removed his shoes, and replaced them with a pair of rope-soled slippers, then went out into the hallway again, closing the door softly. He walked down the hall to Marcus's room, stepping lightly even though he was treading on soft, high-piled carpeting. He opened the door and stepped inside quickly.

This was his first excursion into these private quarters. It was by far the largest room on the second floor, with its own dressing room, bathroom, and a fully equipped exercise room. The large bed was in an alcove beside a window that was as wide as the bed was long. At right angles to the fireplace were two soft lounge chairs, a long sofa against one wall, a leather sofa-lounge for daytime napping. There was a long table with a pair of huge lamps and a series of bookshelves over it. One of the two large, deep closets held two rows of suits and jackets and less formal wear; the other contained hunting and fishing clothes and sports gear. In the dressing room an immense chest of drawers held shirts, socks, underwear, and other linens; there was a shoe rack with what Luther quickly estimated held at least thirty pairs of shoes and boots for every possible purpose.

Having taken a cursory trip through the suite, Luther now began with the entrance door, moving to the right of it, circling the entire room methodically, looking for some evidence of a hiding place. He knew that such a place would not be discovered easily or quickly. He pulled each framed painting forward from the wall, searching for a hitherto undisclosed safe; there was none, nor had he expected to find so obvious a ready solution. He tapped the walls

lightly in various places, but the sounds were constant and showed no difference in pitch from one place to another. He tried to unscrew the tops of the four posts that supported the bed, but this effort was in vain since they had been carved from solid pieces of mahogany. He went into the dressing room, going through the same searching procedure, then through the exercise room and bathroom. He searched every closet, floor, walls, and shelves alike, patted the hanging clothes just in case there might be some kind of a clue in or behind them, reached into the farthest corners and recesses of the shelves. Nothing.

In the top dresser drawer he found the accouterments one would normally expect of a wealthy man: cuff links, studs, and other such jewelry in tooled leather cases; a pocket watch and two wrist watches; old-fashioned watch fobs; several rings, collar pins, and tie clips. There were the usual odds and ends: papers, letters, and notations, pocket secretaries, wallets and card cases. There was a .38-caliber pistol and a box of twenty-four cartridges. Luther did not touch anything in the drawer. The remaining drawers contained handkerchiefs, monogrammed shirts, expensive shorts and undershirts, pajamas. In a lower drawer he found another handsomely tooled leather box. He opened the catch and found several more pairs of cuff links, shirt studs, and tie pins in gold and sterling silver. He lifted the box to examine it and noticed a small leather lip protruding from its side, about an inch up from the bottom. He pulled on the lip and a drawer came out easily. Inside was a single small, flat key, well worn with use.

A feeling of elation came over him, although he had no idea which lock the key might fit or, if he could find such a lock, what he would find behind it. That the key appeared to have its own secret hiding place was enough. He tossed the key up in the air once or twice, caught it, tightened his fist around it, then put it in the watch pocket of his trousers, replaced the secret drawer in the leather box, and returned the box to its proper place in the dresser. There were other keys in that same drawer on a metal ring that held almost a dozen. Luther picked the ring up and examined each key, but they were mostly spare keys to the various cars, luggage and door keys. None matched this separate flat key, special enough to be hidden in the secret bottom compartment of a jewel case.

He shut the dresser drawer and looked around the room to make sure that everything had been put back into its proper place, the paintings hanging straight. He opened the hallway door cautiously,

peered out to make certain Sudie was nowhere about, and went swiftly to his room. He slipped into another pair of shoes, put on his jacket, and went downstairs to his car and drove into town.

In a crowded variety store Luther handed the flat key to a man who operated the small "Fix-it" department and asked him to make a duplicate.

"Two for a quarter," the man said without looking up from under the green shade he wore over his eyes.

"All right, make two," Luther said agreeably.

Within fifteen minutes he was on his way back to the Hall. Neither the station wagon nor Bethann's car were back yet. He smiled at his good luck, then went inside and upstairs. He entered Marcus's room again, quickly replaced the original key in the secret drawer of the leather case. Back in his own room, he lay on the bed and smoked a cigarette, exhaling with relief. So much for that, he thought. Now to find the lock that the key must fit. If he found it, this might be a quick answer to what he sought. Marcus's hiding place. And he was almost totally certain that it had to be somewhere in Marcus's room. He had a very special feeling about that, just as he had gambled that this was a very special key.

Luther returned to the Hall at ten-thirty that night with the perfume of Ruth-Rachel still upon him, the memory of her dazzling his brain. He parked the car in its proper place and let himself in through the rear door. Sudie and Newton were nowhere in sight, evidently retired. There were no visible signs of Bethann or Marcus, although their cars were in the garage. He moved through the quiet of the house, and as he began the ascent to the second floor, the telephone jangled harshly, startling him. He turned toward the telephone standing on the table beside the stairs. Before it could ring again he picked it up.

"Hello," he said into the instrument.

"Luther!" It was Carrie's tight, frightened voice.

"Carrie! Is something wrong?"

"Oh, Luther, I'm so glad I found you. Could you come over right away? Right now? Fred's down in Daly City for the night and Pa's sick. Very sick. He can't seem to catch his breath. I called the doctor, but I'm scared. The girls are in my room and they're scared, too, from the sound of his breathing. Please come over right away, Luther."

"I'll be there in no time. You say the doctor's on his way?"

"He said he'd leave at once."

"I'm on my way."

Luther ran back to the garage, got into his still-warm car, and in seconds was flying down County Road toward Carrie's. He pulled into the driveway, braked the car into a skidding stop, and ran up on the porch where Carrie was already holding the door open for him.

"Where is he?"

"In his room, Luther. The doctor isn't here yet. He's quieted down some. I tried to give him a drink, but he couldn't even swallow it."

In Jud's room evidence of a desperate battle for breath and life was everywhere: the bedclothes strewn over the floor, a chair overturned, articles of clothing scattered about. Jud lay across the bed, one edge of the blanket clutched tightly in his fist, his face blanched white, eyes closed, sucking at the atmosphere with extreme difficulty, struggling to draw the precious air into his lungs. Luther went to him, tried to straighten him around and put his head back on the pillow. With one last great effort Jud turned toward him, called out something completely unintelligible, and fell back on the bed, dead.

Luther had seen enough death to recognize it easily now. Slowly, he pulled his father around and laid him out straight in the bed, crossed his arms on his chest, then pulled the bed sheet and blanket up over his face. He went out of the room, closing the door after him. Carrie was coming out of her own room where her two step-daughters were huddled together, saw the look on Luther's face and his nod to her to indicate that it was all over with Jud Dorman.

They went into the front room and sat on the sofa, both feeling the guilt that comes with not being able to cry or show some other form of deep emotion at the passing of one to whom they had been so close—in contact, if not in sentimental feeling. Now that Jud's death was a fact, neither felt more than a sense of relief for the moment. Luther could see the inner struggle that Carrie was trying to fight and he held her hand tightly and said, "Don't feel badly about him, Carrie. It's all over and there's nothing more you could have done for him. He's well out of it, a lot better off dead than to be here less than half alive."

"I know. I know, Luther. I've felt sorry for him for such a long time, but I couldn't feel any love for him. Only pity. The kind you feel for any sick or crippled person who couldn't help being the way he was."

"Why don't you go back to bed, Carrie?" Luther said. "I'll wait for the doctor and see to everything that needs to be done. I guess we can have the funeral on Sunday, it being so close. He'll have a nice funeral, and then when it's all over, you'll start out on Monday with a new life that includes just your family: Fred, the two girls, and you. No more old, helpless man to clean up behind or stumble around in your way."

"I'll wait up with you, Luther. I want to. The children are asleep now."

The doctor arrived shortly and Luther showed him to Jud's room, stood aside as the brief examination was made, saw the slight perfunctory shake of the doctor's head that pronounced Jud dead. As they came out of the room, Carrie met them in the hall, and they walked together back to the front room. He told them then that death had been due to heart failure and "other contributory causes," that he would fill out the death certificate when he got back to town, if they would provide him with the necessary vital statistics.

The next morning Carrie drove the girls into town while Luther remained at the cottage until the funeral director's hearse came to take Jud Dorman into Regis for the last time, to be prepared for his funeral. When the two men carried Jud out and they had driven off, Luther went into his father's room for one last look, touching his few remaining possessions: the two suits that had been bought for him just before Luther's return; his several pairs of old work overalls, patched, torn, or worn at the knees. He pulled open the clothes closet and found an old overcoat, a yellow slicker, some rubber boots that were split at the sides and rotted, and two pairs of old, worn work shoes. He made a note to take one of the two good suits into town so Jud could be buried in it. On the floor in a corner was a wooden box of some kind, hard to make out in the dark. He pulled it out of the closet, a heavy wooden affair with a metal handle at either end. There was a padlock that locked it, and when Luther tugged at it hard the screws came out easily from the rotted pine. He lifted the lid and inside found a complete set of carpenter's tools, the metal parts well lubricated and covered with oiled rags to prevent rusting. Luther lifted each tool out of the box and laid it out on the table as if they were on display.

On the overhead shelf of the closet was an accumulation of cardboard boxes, an old sweat-soaked, battered hat, and a rubberized rain hat that matched the slicker. Luther pushed the hats aside

and took down the cardboard boxes. The smaller ones held little scraps of yellowed papers, letters that could no longer be deciphered, a few faded photographs and snapshots that were not identifiable. He opened the flat box that had been on the bottom, the largest of the three. Inside were some sheets of yellowed paper, brittle with age, that cracked in places when he lifted them out carefully. He blew the dust from them, then examined each sheet with care.

These were pencil sketches and notes. There were small figures to mark dimensions. The notes were hardly legible in the dim light here, so Luther took them into the kitchen and spread them out on the table where he could see more easily. The top sheet was smeared and completely illegible and he put this to one side on the floor. The next sheet, after a short examination, he recognized at once. This was the fireplace in Marcus's study at the Hall. There were the fluted pilasters on either side, the carvings below the mantel clearly indicated. He saw the rougher pencil strokes that indicated changes in the plans, evidently made before the actual work had begun.

It became clear to him that the pilasters on either side of the fireplace were hollow and were, in fact, places of concealment, hinged on each side to the back of the mantel; therefore entry could be effected only from the sides. A feverish impatience overtook him, an excitement that was almost unbearable; and then came the doubt.

If this were the hiding place, why had Marcus gone *outside* his study to bring back the \$5000? Why had it been necessary for him to go upstairs? He could easily have left Luther in the dining room, or sent him to his own room for that matter, while he went alone into the study and got the money from the hiding place. Then, he reasoned logically, if Jud had built this hiding place in the study fireplace, why couldn't he have—?

Quickly, hopefully, he shuffled through the remaining sheets of paper. There were some that showed the paneling in the study and library, additions to the stables, a wall broken through upstairs and the room added to Marcus's bedroom; other changes that Jud had worked on at the Hall. The final sheet gave him what he sought. This was a sketch and plan of the fireplace in Marcus's room. Very clearly he could make out the arc of its wide opening just under the flat ledge of the mantel. It was different from the one in the study in that the pilasters were carved in another design and showed no indication that they had been hollowed out or hinged at the sides. Between the mantel's flat ledge and the bottom of the upright

mirror across its entire length was a thin spiraled line that could very well indicate a hinge. If this were so, he thought with sudden inner turbulence, if this were so . . .

Luther gathered all the papers together in a loose roll, put them under his arm, and went outside behind the house where he placed them inside the close-meshed wire trashburner. He put a match to two corners of the brittle papers, and within a matter of seconds they were flaming tongues of red; in less than a minute they were entirely consumed, turned to puffs of black, curled ashes. He picked up a stick and stirred them about until they fell in charred flakes to the bottom of the wire basket. Now all that remained of Jud Dorman's possessions were his oiled, well-protected tools and the few meager articles of clothing in his room.

When Carrie returned, he told her of the arrangements he had made for the funeral on Sunday, and after she had assured him she would be all right, that Fred would be back shortly after noon, he left, going directly to the bank.

He knocked on the communicating door between his office and Marcus's and, when invited to come in, told Marcus of Jud's death. Marcus seemed actually saddened by the news and offered his condolences and asked after Carrie. Luther thanked him and said he would go home and lie down for a while. Bethann was home when he came in and he told her about Jud. Her first concern, too, seemed to be for Carrie. She expressed her sympathy and said she would stop by to look in on Carrie when she went out later. Luther went up to his room and lay on his bed.

He thought of Marcus Radford and speculated on how different his world would be if he had been Marcus's son instead of Jud's; the benefits he would have enjoyed through close association with the Harry Bledsos, the Edgar Thorpes, the Joel Harrises of the world—men with background, education, ambition, and direction in life; men who knew, without a doubt, what lay ahead of them, who could face up to each new day with confidence. He thought again that if this marriage of his to Bethann were a real marriage, their lives might have some significance together, and he would be Marcus's son-in-law in fact and not a convenient "paper" son-in-law; that—

Suddenly he remembered his recent discussion with Harry Bledso and his thoughts toward Marcus Radford again turned belligerent. To hell with you, Marcus Radford, he said to himself; if what I'm looking for is where I think it could be hidden, I'll be the one who puts you behind bars and throws the key away. Me, Luther Dor-

man. A poor white-trash nobody you once ordered to stay away from your daughter, then came sucking around to have me marry her. Like they say in the Army, a man's a sucker to make a target out of himself, because as soon as he does, some little son-of-a-bitch that can hardly hit the side of the barn from the inside is going to pick up his peashooter and *wham!* you ain't going to be nothing but a nothing. And that's what you're going to be when I'm through with you, Mr. Marcus Radford. A target. Nothing but a nothing. Compliments of Master Sergeant Luther Dorman, the guy with the peashooter!

The thought of Marcus Radford stimulated and inflamed him with restlessness. He tried to formulate some kind of plan, but knew that before his eager wishful thinking could become a cohesive action, he must find what he sought. Now he had a double purpose in life: first, to locate the money he would need for himself and Ruth-Rachel; second, to find the records or information that Bledso must have in order to knock Marcus out of the picture. Even if he were successful in only the first instance, he would be satisfied; he would be sure to have more than enough money to take Ruth-Rachel with him, divorce or no.

He heard the engine of the station wagon start up and went to the window, saw Lolly come running out of the kitchen entrance, race around to the open right door of the car, and leap up into the seat beside Newton for the ride into town to do whatever shopping errands needed doing before stopping by the nursery to pick up Harriet. Fifteen minutes later he heard Bethann's car start up and again went to the window and watched as she pulled out into the driveway and disappeared from his view on the highway.

Now that he knew what he was looking for and had a good idea where to look for it, he would need very little time alone in Marcus's room. Sudie, he knew, would not come upstairs to disturb him. He went toward Marcus's room, opened the door, and slipped inside quietly. In the middle of the room, he stood still, casting around nervously, his hands trembling slightly. Suddenly, he released the breath he had been holding in his lungs, then breathed again deeply, exhaling, inhaling, exhaling. It was better now. The trembling in his hands ceased and he was more relaxed.

He reached into the watch pocket of his trousers and took out one of the two flat keys, then walked slowly to the fireplace. It was a massive piece of fine carving, and he recalled the numerous occasions Carrie had told him of Jud's skill with woodcarving tools, his ability as a carpenter and cabinetmaker, and Jud's own boasting

along similar lines. He stepped up closer to examine his father's handiwork, passed his hand over the carvings with some admiration. Now he reached under the lip of the mantel, running his fingers back and forth until he touched the smooth circle of metal, small as a dime, the slight, jagged indentation for a key across its middle, a key such as he held in his left hand. He kept one finger on the lock and carefully guided the key to it, inserted it easily into the indentation. He held it there momentarily, pleased with himself, then turned the key slowly clockwise, felt with elation the locking bar being pushed to one side.

It was unlocked.

He withdrew the key and replaced it in his watch pocket beside its mate. He rubbed his hands together, found them wet with perspiration, wiped them along the sides of his trousers. He was breathing hard with excitement and beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead, his face moist with it, but he was too intent with the purpose of his mission to pay attention.

He lifted the two vases from the mantel and placed them on the floor. There were five silver-framed photographs to be removed, and he placed them on the floor in the exact position in which they had rested on the mantel so that he could replace them without showing any sign that they had been touched. The manteltop cleared, he put the palms of both hands to the extended forward lip and raised it upward. Silently, easily, the mantel opened, revealing the dark cavern that had been clearly indicated in Jud's penciled drawings. He lifted the ledge and set the hinged arm that would keep it in the raised position while he made his examination. He looked down inside and saw a flashlight and silently thanked Marcus for having been so thoughtful.

Christ! he thought. If I could only risk a cigarette now!

The metal-lined cavern was approximately fourteen inches deep, twelve inches wide, and thirty-six inches long, although the entire length of the mantel measured some ten or twelve feet, with the hollowed-out section in the exact center. The location of the lock was ingeniously concealed by the intricate floral carvings along the front edge, and without Jud's drawings he knew he could never have found it. He took a deep breath and guided the flashlight across the length of the opening.

The money was stacked in rows on the right side of the cavern, banded neatly by denomination, a hand-printed figure on the tan band indicating the total of each packet of bills. There were rows of hundreds, fifties, and some twenties. None of the money was in

new bills, but similar in used condition to the \$5000 Marcus had given him that night in the study.

In the center of the cavern was an empty space and, to the left of it, a stack of file folders and a small ledger-type book. He picked up the top folder, opened it, and glanced through the ruled, yellow sheets that were fastened inside. The top sheet was dated to identify the present month of the current year. Beneath it were sheets for each month since January. He replaced this file, extracted the one that lay a little below the surface of the pile. This was dated 1940 and it contained twelve sheets, one for each month of that year.

Without the information he had got from Harry Bledso in their talk, the symbols and figures on each page would have meant nothing to him. Now they began to fall into a pattern that made sense. Each sheet was broken down into weekly columns and dated on the Monday of each week. On that day there were perhaps a dozen entries, each line showing a small square or circle or triangle or hexagon or octagonal symbol. To the right of the symbol was a column that showed an amount of money. Obviously, then, each symbol represented a different source of the money collected each Monday of every month, and the amount collected. The largest amount was no doubt from the whiskey manufacturing and distribution; next would be the gambling operations, the houses of prostitution, "party contributions," and so on down the line. Opposite the "receipts" page was a long list of numbers and beside each was an amount of money, which, Luther surmised from his talk with Bledso, would be the monies paid out during the month, the payoff money that would reach throughout the state and beyond its borders. And if Bledso and his people could identify names with symbols and numbers, he could undoubtedly round up the entire organization from top to bottom.

It took only a quick glance to see that from the amounts recorded on these pages, the money here in Marcus's secret hiding place was only chickenfeed compared with the total take. Of course, much of it was already siphoned off in payoffs; still more must be held in safety elsewhere. The rest of the cash was probably at the bank in a private vault and the money here used only when it became necessary to make a payment after banking hours. Also, much of it might be spread around in other banks in and outside the state.

Luther put the 1940 file down on the floor for a moment. His attention came back to the money and he began to lift the packets out of the cavern. Each packet was banded and marked to contain one hundred bills. He counted ten packets of hundreds, fifteen of

fifties, and ten of twenties, a total of thirty-five neat, flat packets. Laboriously, he added up the amount in his mind.

Before him lay \$195,000 in cash!

Again he found himself choked up and had to expel the air in his lungs and take several deep breaths before he could relax enough to go on. It took a full minute before he could overcome the immensity of what lay before him here on the carpet, and he was almost overwhelmed by an all-consuming greed to take the money and files and drive to Chancellor at once. He could turn the files over to Harry Bledso, then take off for unknown places with the money— The thought brought heavy perspiration to him and he took a few more deep breaths and became calmer.

It would be a ridiculous thing to do. Marcus's strength and arm length was tremendous in the state and he would stop at nothing, not even murder, to find Luther and these most incriminating files; and what good would the money do him if he were dead—just as dead as Garrett Harwick—and only God knew how many other deaths had been inspired by Mr. Marcus Audrey Radford, directed at those who had at one time or another challenged him, threatened his authority. Besides, if he left in this manner, he would have to leave Ruth-Rachel behind, and by now she had become as important—even more important—to him than Carrie. No, he thought with a wave of loyalty, not more important than Carrie. But damn near.

Cool off, boy, he told himself. There was still the matter of his divorce from Bethann standing between himself and total freedom. If he worked his cards right, if he could figure out some kind of a plan, a timetable of action, he might be able to pull this thing off.

Put it all back, boy, he cautioned. Make sure everything is back the way it was before you touched it. Don't get careless and ruin everything now. So far, you're doing fine. Just fine.

He began to replace the money in the exact order in which he had taken it out of the metal-lined well, each package of hundreds, fifties, and twenties in its own neat stack. He lowered the mantel ledge into place, locked it with the key, replaced the two vases and the five photo frames in the same positions they had occupied originally. He looked into the mirror over the ledge and grinned to himself with satisfaction. He turned to leave, picked up the 1940 file, tucked it inside his shirt, and took one last look around to make sure everything else was in order. Satisfied, he went to the door and opened it a tiny crack, peered out cautiously into the hallway before he opened it wide enough to slip out and go to his own room.

Once there, he checked his wrist watch again. Operation Discovery had taken only seventeen minutes from start to finish.

5.

So Marcus Radford *was* Mr. Big. Bledso had hinted at it, but Paul Tullis had been more direct in his accusation.

Mr. Big. Every retail outlet supplied by the stills, every man or woman who drank, gambled, whored, smoked a marijuana cigarette, or was addicted to narcotics in a higher, more expensive form, every peddler or pusher, every operator of an illegal enterprise, all these were paying tribute to Marcus Audrey Radford, leading citizen.

And I got the whip in my hands this time, Luther thought. I got the means to cut him down, he repeated with grim satisfaction. Whatever Bledso gets out of it, I'm going to get that money. When I leave here for Reno, I want that note I signed for the \$5000 and the \$15,000 he promised me in cash. Not *after* the divorce. No, sir. *Before!* Then I'll find a way to get what's cached away in that mantel—\$195,000! Then I'll get Ruth-Rachel and we'll be on our way. Once we're out of here, it'll be for good. Let Marcus Radford try to find me then, by God. Once I blow the whistle on him, he'll be too damned busy talking to Uncle Sam to be looking for me.

Luther chuckled with glee. Even if he does catch up to me, he won't find the money on me; and I'd like to see him explain how come he had that much cash money hidden away in his house. Time they get the papers in this file— I'll take the last couple of year's files when I take the cash, just for extra protection. By God, they'll sure be happy in that income tax office up there in Chancellor when Harry walks in and lays it in their laps. And it won't cost them a red cent. He chuckled again. I'll do it as my loyal and patriotic duty as a good American citizen!

A timetable. I need a timetable to work this thing out. I don't want to miss anything, not a single trick, else I could wind up suddenly dead. I got to work it out so that I get that money and a couple more files and that note I signed and the \$15,000 before I leave town. None of that "you'll get it when you get back to Regis" business. By the time Ruth-Rachel and I are taking life easy in Reno, Bledso will be taking care of Marcus so he'll be too busy to bother about looking for us. Time we travel around some, maybe it'll be clear enough for us to come back to Chancellor. I'll keep in touch with Harry and he'll let me know when it's safe to come back. Marcus out of the way, we'll see what Sergeant Luther Dorman, Medal of Honor man, and his old buddy, Harry Bledso, can cook

up for me in Chancellor, what job I can run for. Sheriff? Assembly or State Senate? Congress? Man, won't that be something for me and Ruth-Rachel, spreading ourselves around in Chancellor or even in Washington? It wouldn't be like last time, with me belonging to the Army. This time Washington'd belong to me. To us.

He picked up the file and knew he must do something with it, hide it in a safe place. Where?

For the time being he must get it out of the house. He again unbuttoned his shirt and put the file inside it against his body, then buttoned the shirt and put his jacket on over it. He went downstairs and out through the back door to the garage, got into his car and drove along County Road to a narrow, little-used dirt road where there was a small clearing. He got out of the car, unlocked the trunk of the car, lifted the floor carpeting and put the 1940 file under it, replaced the carpeting and smoothed it down, locked the trunk again. Now he removed the separate trunk key from his key ring and put it in the watch pocket with the two flat keys to Marcus's hiding place. For the moment he was satisfied.

6.

On the morning after Jud's funeral Luther stopped by to see Carrie. The girls had been taken into town by Fred and she was alone. Luther had a cup of coffee with her, was satisfied that she was all right, then went out to the driveway where he had parked his car. He unlocked the trunk and removed the file from under the carpet. He took the ruled yellow sheets out of the file and folded them down so they would fit in his inside jacket pocket without attracting too much notice. He put the stiff file cover in the wire trashburner and put a match to it, waiting until it had been entirely consumed. Then he drove into town.

Marcus had not yet reached his office. Luther went outside and asked Miss Marshall for an envelope. She opened her desk and handed him a regular bank envelope.

"Do you have anything a little larger?" Luther asked. "Something—"

She reached into the drawer again and came out with a manila envelope, somewhat larger than the normal-sized envelope. This, he saw, had no return address on it. "Will this do?" Miss Marshall asked. "We use these for people who need an envelope to put their insurance papers or bonds away."

"That'll do just fine, Miss Marshall. Thanks a lot."

Back in his office, he got the papers out of his jacket pocket and

put them into the top drawer of his desk while he addressed the envelope to Harry Bledso at the address he had given him in Chancellor. In the upper left corner he put only two initials, "L.D.," and in the lower left corner he wrote the word, "*Personal.*"

Luther put the sealed envelope in the side pocket of his jacket and went into the bank to the counter where Donna Martin presided over the safety-deposit-box section. He filled out an application blank for a box, went into the vault enclosure where he received the long, flat metal receptacle. Donna left him alone in the customers' private enclosure while he put the envelope into the box. He called Donna back and saw the container go back into the section reserved for key number 115. Now it was as safe as it could be anywhere. Right in Mr. Marcus Radford's own bank.

He went out of the enclosure and Donna called to him. "You forgot your key, Mr. Dorman," she said with a bright smile. "You don't want to do that now that you've got all your valuables in one place."

He smiled in return, but the immensity of his carelessness brought a quick layer of dampness to his forehead and hands. "No. I sure don't. Thanks, Donna," he said. He put the key in the small watch pocket with the others, cursing his stupidity.

Back in his office, he began working out the rough timetable he would need in order to pull off this great *coup* of his life. He lit a cigarette, took up a pencil and pad of plain white paper, and began to doodle a series of concentric circles, irregular lines and squares while he thought of just how he would take each step in its proper turn.

Chapter 15

1.

Chief Deputy Hessie Loomis came out of the sheriff's office into the warming sunlight. He walked down the wide steps of the building and crossed the pavement to where his official car sat at the curb and got into it, sitting behind the wheel as though trying to make up his mind where to go. He pulled a flat plug of tobacco out of his shirt pocket, cut a small square from it and put it into his mouth, beginning the process of softening it into a chewable cud. He sat at the curb for a few minutes, shifted his gunbelt and holster around for maximum comfort while driving, pushed the wide-brimmed hat back on his head.

Sitting in the motionless car, HESSIE's cold practiced eyes took in the scene lazily. He knew many of the people who passed by, most of them by name, and he sat and called off the names of those who walked past the car as if it were some kind of a game he were playing and— Now the game was lost to him, ended as he looked ahead and saw Lida-Mae Tilebin coming along the pavement, a brown, oblong envelope clutched in her hand. He watched with a sense of inner alertness as she walked along, admiration in his eyes for her trim liveness, her provocative figure as she crossed the street from the Square, heading for the bank building. How well he knew the body beneath those clothes, he thought. All woman, more than he had ever known in any other before her or since. All woman.

He saw her enter the bank and knew that the envelope she carried contained Robbie's pension check that he had probably endorsed for her to cash. He sat in the car waiting until she came out, saw her close her purse, take a firm grip on it, then cross the street into the Square again, heading for the southwest corner to wait for the bus that would take her out County Road as far as Buckeytown. When he could no longer see her through the trees and foliage, he started his motor and drove slowly around the Square, saw her as she got on the bus. Now he shot past the moving vehicle and drove

out along the County Road, pulled his car to one side to park just short of the bus stop closest to her house.

Hessie waited for perhaps twenty minutes before the bus pulled up. Lida-Mae was the only passenger to get off at the stop. She checked the traffic both ways before crossing the wide highway, then made her move. When she got to the other side and started down the dirt road toward her home, Hessie stepped out from behind a tree and said, "Hello, Lida-Mae."

She stopped, her mouth and throat gone suddenly dry. She made a futile move to one side to pass him, but he stepped in her path and blocked her passage. "Just you hold on a minute, girl," he said.

Numbly, she said, "What do you want?"

"You wouldn't know, I suppose."

She said nothing, standing frozen with fear, unable to move. He came closer to her. "You meet me at my fishing cabin tomorrow night," he said, taking her wrist in his hand, holding it firmly. "Nine-thirty," he added.

She took a deep breath before she spoke. "I'm through with you, Mr. Loomis," she said, trying to pull her wrist from his grasp, but he increased the pressure until it became too painful to resist.

"Now what was that you was sayin'?" he asked with a grin across his crooked mouth.

"I said I'm through with you. My husband is home and I got him to care for. Him and the children. I'm telling you—"

Hessie tightened his grip on her wrist and twisted it slightly to add emphasis to his words. "You ain' tellin' me nothin', Lida-Mae," he said cruelly. "I'm tellin' *you*! You better be there 'cause if you don't show up by nine-thirty tomorrow night, I'll come lookin' for you right in your own house. Your soldier boy starts anything, it'll be his last night here on earth an' the beginnin' of a long rest for you in my jail. Is that the way you want it?"

She turned away, unable to stand the pain in her wrist or the cold gaze of his snakelike eyes. "No, sir," she said helplessly.

He eased up the tension on her wrist. "All right, now. You be there. Tomorrow night nine-thirty. You hear me?"

She nodded, her eyes downcast on the road, her face damp with perspiration and strain. Hessie released her wrist and walked back up to his car.

2.

At exactly eight o'clock that same evening Luther pulled his car up to the edge of the lawn that bordered the dirt road where Robbie

Tilebin lived. In the darkness he saw the figure rise out of the chair on one leg, steady himself, and reach for a pair of crutches that leaned again the wall nearby. It was the first time Luther had seen Robbie without his artificial limb, and now, as he walked down the path to the car, it was difficult to realize that this hunched-over figure was the Robbie Tilebin he had known for so long.

"Don't blow the horn," Robbie had cautioned when he phoned Luther earlier in the afternoon. "You just pull up a couple doors away and I'll come down. I'll be watching for you from the porch. Can you make it about eight?"

"Hello, Luther," he heard the low, husky voice now. "I'm sure glad you could come over."

"Hello, Robbie," Luther replied as he leaned over to open the door. Robbie put the two crutches inside the car as he rested on one foot, then swung himself into the seat beside Luther. The car moved out, headed back toward the road until it came to a turnoff where he parked.

"I sure appreciate you coming down here to see me, Luther. I sent Lida-Mae down to the store with the children to get some cigarettes and candy."

"Glad I could come, Robbie. How come you using your crutches? The leg acting up again?"

Robbie nodded. "Old stump, he's worrying at me some."

"You been taking care of it?"

Again Robbie nodded. "I went to see Dr. Thomason at County General. He says I ought to get back to the Army hospital and get me another operation. He thinks there's some infection and it's going to take another one to get it all out. Means shortening the stump some and waiting around till it heals up again. I ought to go up on the morning train. Old Doc says there's no time to be a-wastin'."

"You going to do that, Robbie?"

"I don't know."

"Why not? What's worrying you, Robbie, money?"

Robbie moved about, shifting to a more comfortable position. "No, not money. It's the same old trouble, Luther. Loomis. He's after Lida-Mae. When I got back this last time, I could see something happened. Something bad. She didn't say anything or complain to me once I was back, but I just knew something happened. Then Henry-Abe Johnson, who lives across the street from us, he told me about Hessie Loomis, that he's been coming by. Pesterin' her, he said, but if you know Loomis like I know him, it was more than just pestering. I finally talked to Lida-Mae and told her I knew

about him and that I wasn't holding it against her, knowing it wasn't her fault. Then she cried and told me all about it and what would happen to her or the children or her folks if she didn't go when he come for her. I asked her how come she didn't call you like I told her to do, did she need any help about anything. She said that all the time I was away he didn't give her no chance, that he'd come by late at night and roust her out or sneak up on her on the porch 'thout giving her time to call anybody." He smiled wryly. "We got no telephone here. Nearest one's a couple blocks away." Again he laughed mirthlessly. "How you work your way out of somethin' like that?" he asked.

Luther's angry mind churned, conjuring images of himself destroying Loomis with his fists, battering him into bloody helplessness. "You going to do what Dr. Thomason says about going back to Walter Reed in Washington?"

"How can I do that and leave Lida-Mae and the children behind for Loomis to do whatever he wants with?"

"You could take her and the two kids to Washington with you, couldn't you, Robbie?"

Robbie shook his head. "She never been away from here in her whole life. Born, raised, and married here. She'd have to live up there in a great big city, strange to everybody and all alone with the children whilst I was at the hospital. Colored people up there are so afraid and mean, it's just as bad for other colored folks. I don't know how she could do it, Luther. I might be up there for a long time."

"I see," Luther said. "You going to catch that morning train?"

"I don't know. That's what's been bothering me. Doc says every day I waste is dangerous. Old stump, he'll just go on getting worse. If I didn't have this other thing on my mind, I'd get out of here fast as that train could take me."

"Robbie," Luther said, "tell me this: Are there any men you know who came back from Italy or Europe with some of the souvenirs they picked up over there? Some guns? And maybe the ammo to fit them?"

"Sure, Luther. I got a Beretta myself and a load of nine-millimeter stuff to fit it. A dozen more boys got 'em, too. Some even got them a few hand grenades and knives and other souvenirs besides."

"You think some of 'em might be willing to do a job and keep their mouths shut afterwards?"

"You mean on Loomis?" Robbie's voice heightened with excitement.

Luther nodded. "On Loomis. That son-of-a-bitch got something coming his way and it's about time we saw to it he gets it."

Robbie said reflectively, "I know for sure about four or five I could get. They wouldn't talk 'cause they know they'd be in it for their own necks. I know I could get at least four, Luther."

"All right. How about this? You go on ahead and catch that train for Washington in the morning. Now, you got this friend Henry—something lives over there across the street, right?"

"That's right. Henry-Abe Johnson and his wife, Maybelle. They're good people and good friends. The best."

"All right. Now suppose this Henry-Abe and his wife keep a watch out for Loomis. He shows up, he finds the doors and windows to your house shut maybe, he's got to make some kind of a noise to try to wake Lida-Mae up. If he comes earlier, they'll spot him or his car or both. Either way, as soon as they know he's there, they send out a call for your four friends. If they phone me, I'll come along as soon as I can get there. . . ."

It was an hour later that Luther dropped Robbie at his house and Robbie was trying to thank Luther for his plan and help. "Hell, Robbie," Luther said, "don't thank me. That skunk ought to've been taken care of a long time ago. He's mighty long overdue right this minute."

"How much longer are we going to be able to keep this up, Luther?" Ruth-Rachel asked suddenly as they lay together on the sofa in the dark room of the Radford cottage along the Welcome River. It was the night following his conversation with Robbie and he assumed Robbie had left that morning to return to the hospital in Washington.

"Keep what up?" Luther asked.

"This. We keep coming down here, somebody's got to find out about it. Even if your wife don't give a damn about us, we can't—"

He drew her closer to himself, laughed. "Don't go worrying your pretty head about something don't need worrying over. Besides, it won't be long now. I been working on this thing and it's almost finished. In a little while we're going to take us a trip, a good long one."

"What thing? Why can't you tell me what thing you're working on? If you got something as good as all that, tell me about it. Maybe I could stand it a little better."

"Listen, honey. I told you already, I can't say anything about it.

I can't tell you anything except that it's almost ready to happen. Only one last bit of it isn't worked out yet. When that happens, honey, we're going to be the two happiest people in the country. In the world! I promise you! You'll look back to now and tell yourself how crazy you were ever to doubt me."

"I want to believe you, Luther, honest I do. But every day in that house with her is like a month."

"I wish it was tonight, Ruth-Rachel, honest to God I do," Luther burst out quickly. "But I need another week. Two at the outside most. For God's sake, don't do anything now to upset things."

"I won't, Luther," she promised. "I don't want anything to happen to us or come between us."

He laughed lightly, lovingly. "Close as we are right this minute, the only thing can come between us is us. Nothing else."

She laughed with him, feeling his body moving against her own, forcing herself tightly against him. "Oh, Luther, I love being with you. Every single minute of it."

She kissed him, taking his kiss in return. "Well, then," she said, "if you won't tell me, why don't we stop wasting time and—?" Her voice faded and she pulled upward and away from him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Listen," she whispered. "I thought I heard something outside."

He cocked his head toward the door and nodded assent. He could hear the light step threading its way down the slight incline toward the cottage, soft, careful steps heading in their direction. Quietly, he got off the sofa, pulled off his shoes, and went to the window that looked out on the front porch, standing cautiously to one side, peering between the drawn blind and the windowpane. He could make out a dark form moving against the lighter background. It came skulking along slowly, making every effort to prevent noise. When the form passed out of his view behind several trees, Luther came back to the sofa where Ruth-Rachel was standing, nervously adjusting her clothes. He took her hand and led her to the window, let her peek out to see. At first there was nothing, and then from the side they saw the dark figure again, coming up the narrow walk toward the steps, slowly, quietly, now gripping the side rail, mounting the steps. Luther could feel Ruth-Rachel trembling with fear. He gripped her shoulder hard to still her, quiet his own nerves.

"Who is it?" she whispered, terror creeping into her voice.

"Sh-h. I don't know. Take it easy. I'm here with you. Anything happens, he starts breaking in, you light out through the back way.

Go back to the bedroom now, get your coat and stand ready by the back door. Don't say anything or cry out or make any noise to let on you're even here. First sign of something wrong, you get out fast as you can. Don't try to make it to the car. Just hide back in the woods till it's all over and I can come for you. If I can't, well—"

She nodded; he turned and kissed her swiftly, ran a hand over her smooth, warm body. She turned and tiptoed back to the bedroom. Luther went back to the stove and came back with a stout piece of firewood. Now there was a light tap on the door, then silence. Another tapping, heavier than the last. A moment later he heard the small, muffled voice call out, "Mr. Luther!"

Still Luther did not answer, unable to recognize the voice. It might be a trick of Marcus's hatchet man, HESSIE LOOMIS, looking to do to him what he had done to GARRETT HARWICK. The tap came again, then once more, and now the voice. "Mr. Luther! Mr. Luther! It's LIDA-MAE TILEBIN. Can I talk to you for just a minute? Please, Mr. Luther!"

In the pitch blackness he tried to identify the voice with the face and form of ROBBIE TILEBIN's wife, and when they matched up in his mind, he turned the latch and opened the door a mere crack, then wider to permit her to enter the room. He closed the door quickly, latched it, put a hand into his trousers pocket, and pulled out a paper pad of matches. The light flickered up toward her face.

"Okay, Lida-Mae," he said, "come over here and wait till I get the rest of my clothes on. You sit right here on this sofa and don't make a light or noise of any kind. I'll be right back."

In the bedroom he found RUTH-RACHEL crouching behind the door, fully dressed. "It's all right, honey," he whispered. "Just you stay quiet and don't let on you're in here."

"Who is it, Luther? It sounded a little like a woman."

He laughed softly. "You jealous? Hell, it might even be my wife."

"Who is it?" she demanded again in a low, fierce whisper.

"It's LIDA-MAE TILEBIN. ROBBIE TILEBIN's wife. I told you about him, the colored fellow from Buckeytown, used to be handyman at the Hall before the war. He lost a leg in Italy. I promised him I'd help him if he ever needed me."

"Help him? How?"

"It's a little complicated. He had to go back to Washington this morning to the Army hospital for another operation. This is a little something I told him I'd take care of for him."

"How—? I don't see what—"

"Honey, I told you it's a little complicated, but I can't go back on my promise. While I talk to Lida-Mae, you can listen at the door. I'll leave it open when I go out."

He finished buttoning his shirt and went back to the front room. "Lida-Mae?" he called softly.

"I'm here, Mr. Luther."

"How'd you know I was here?" he asked.

"Oh." Then hesitantly, "We know you been coming down here pretty regular lately with—well, Robbie told me before he left this morning that if I needed anything to telephone you at the bank or at the Hall, and if I couldn't find you there to come see if you were here. I saw your car parked between the trees, so I knew you were here."

"What's the trouble, Lida-Mae?" Luther asked.

"I don't mean to put you out, Mr. Luther, but it's—him—it's—" "Loomis?"

"Yes, sir. It's him. He's after me again."

"What's he up to this time?"

"He—I—run into him yesterday coming home from Regis where I'd gone to cash Robbie's pension check to buy the train ticket this morning. I—I got to meet him tonight at his fishing place."

"Tonight? What time tonight?"

"Nine-thirty. He told me to be at his cabin no later'n nine-thirty, else he would come to our cabin and take me in. And if Robbie was there and gave him any lip, he'd finish him off this time. I didn't tell Robbie because if I did, I knew he wouldn't leave this morning and that leg of his needs looking after. Mr. Luther, I need help real bad this time. I can't let him—do—what he pleases no more. Not even if I—"

Luther reached for Lida-Mae's hand and took it into his own. "He won't, Lida-Mae. Not tonight, he won't, by sure God!" He breathed hard.

"You'll come?" Her voice heightened and he could hear the lift in it, the relief that came with those two words.

"Sure. Sure, I'll come." He pulled out his matches and struck one, held it over his wrist watch. "Eight-ten. More than an hour. That's more than enough time. Listen, Lida-Mae, you go home. I'll be there in less than half an hour. Soon as you get back, you get in touch with those four or five boys Robbie told me about. You know who I mean? He told you about them, didn't he?"

She nodded. "He told me."

"Good. You get them to come to your place and we'll go down to that fishing shack together. Tell them to bring any hand guns they got. You got that straight?"

"Yes, sir. And thank you, Mr. Luther. Robbie said you was a good friend. First off, I didn't believe any white man in Regis was a friend to any colored man. Now I know you are a real, true friend. I'm sorry I took so long to find it out. God bless you, Mr. Luther. We'll be waiting for you." She gripped his hand tightly, lifted it to her mouth and kissed it.

"All right, Lida-Mae. You get on back now and get things ready. I'll be there in about twenty minutes. That'll give us plenty of time to get there before he does so we can set things up for Mr. Hessie Loomis's welcoming party."

He opened the door and let her out into the night, and she ran quickly up the path and disappeared. Luther went back to the bedroom as Ruth-Rachel threw the door open. "What was that all about?" she asked anxiously.

He told her about Hessie Loomis and how, during Robbie's absences, the deputy had been molesting Lida-Mae, using threats against her children and parents in order to have his way with her. Ruth-Rachel's attitude was one of complete concern for Luther. "What are you getting mixed up in it for, Luther? You fool around with a mean one like that Hessie Loomis, you could get yourself hurt real bad. Maybe permanent. He's a rough customer."

"He been after you, too?" Luther asked.

"Before I was married he tried, but I always managed to out-smart him. He isn't too handy with white girls the way he is with the nigger gals."

"All right, honey," Luther said abruptly. "Now you stay here till I come back for you. Else I can drop you at the bus stop now. If you stay here, I'll pick you up when we finish with Mr. Hessie Loomis, but I can't tell you how long we'll be."

"If you're able, you mean. Don't do it, Luther. You could get yourself hurt bad. Killed, even. What are you mixing in some nigger's troubles for? What do you care what niggers Hessie Loomis lays up with?"

Luther took Ruth-Rachel's shoulders into his hands and shook her firmly. "Listen, Ruth-Rachel," he said with a strong, passionate voice. "That Robbie is a good boy, always helping me with something or other that was too much or too big or too hard for me to do alone. He taught me some tricks about hunting and fishing I never could of learned from any white man. Sure—when nobody else would

have anything to do with a drunken sharecropper's kid. He was decent to me. You know what that means? And during the war he was a real hero. He did something that damned few men would ever have the guts to do, facing up to them Heinies; then he stepped onto a land mine that took his leg off. Doing something that had to be done. He fought as hard and as good in a short time than most soldiers fought all during the whole war. And all he got for it was a Bronze Star and a pension. What he didn't get was the same rights you and I got—the right to be free from a no-good bastard like HESSIE LOOMIS.”

“Well, how about you? You did a lot more than he did to win the Medal of Honor, didn't you?”

“Ruth-Rachel, listen. Robbie Tilebin was more of a hero than I'll ever be, but he's only a nigger, so he didn't get no more'n the Bronze Star. He needs help now and I got to help him. I got to. His wife's in trouble and he's not here to take care of her himself. I got to do it because I know damn well that if it was you who was in trouble and I couldn't be here, I could count on Robbie Tilebin to help you because you belonged to me. I just got to help him. That's the way it is.”

Ruth-Rachel came into his arms and kissed him hard. “I guess you do, Luther, if you feel it that much. You go ahead. I'll wait right here for you till you come back. Just make sure you come back in one piece, else I'll be waiting here a mighty long time for you.”

4.

Hessie Loomis parked among the trees on the lower river road. He unbuckled his pistol belt and put it on the floor of the unmarked police car he had chosen, locked the door, and made sure the other three doors were locked. He looked around as he pocketed the key, satisfied that he was alone, then moved down the dirt path toward the fishing shack that belonged to Will Bartly and himself. He went around by the back way, opened the door silently, and stepped inside, into the small kitchen. He closed the door and shot the bolt and reached for the coal-oil lamp that usually stood on the table next to the door, but it was missing. He went into the only other room in the cabin, a large combination living room-bedroom-dining room all in one. In two corners were large double beds, and scattered around were a miscellany of chairs and tables, a cupboard for dishes, a wardrobe for clothes. He moved over toward the round dining table in search of the lamp. It was not there.

As though he could sense the presence of someone else in the room with him, he called out, "Lida-Mae?"

She stood up from the chair in which she had been sitting, moved a foot or two toward the right where he could make out her outline against the lighter gray of the windowpanes. "I'm here," she said in her low, velvety voice.

He laughed with male satisfaction. "Sho. I knew you'd be here. Whyn't you light the lamp?"

"I didn't have any matches with me," she replied.

"I'll get it," he said and came forward to the table beside which she had been sitting, reaching out experimentally to avoid knocking the lamp over in the dark. As he turned and bent over it to remove the chimney, a hard blow caught him from the left side and the lamp fell to the floor with a crash, its chimney splintering explosively. His body fell across the table, and as he pressed his hands downward on its surface in order to lift himself, he took another blow on the other side of his head that knocked him to the floor on his knees, his chin striking the edge of the table. He was dazed, but not unconscious; and as he tried to get to his feet, he felt a pair of huge arms slip from behind under his own, then his shoulders were pulled upward hard, almost jerking his arms out of their sockets. He came up with the force of the pull in back of him and the strange hands behind his neck locked into a full nelson.

He relaxed for a moment, going limp, then leaped forward hoping to break the man's hold, but the man moved forward with him and he was being held firmly by someone who knew how to take an almost professional advantage of a full nelson. He struggled upward, raised both feet from the floor, stamped downward heavily in an attempt to crush his opponent's instep and thus surprise him into loosening his grip, but the man moved with him, let him swing left and then right, up, then down, but kept his grip hard and tight without wavering in the least.

Another figure materialized where the two puffed and panted with the exertion. The newcomer spoke to the first man, saying, "Hold him steady, boy." The first man braced his feet on the floor and drew his locked hands downward and Hessie Loomis's motion was stopped completely. Now the second man stepped in front of Hessie, drew back his fist, and hit the deputy flush on his left jaw. A sharp, gasping "Ah-h-h!" escaped him, then a soughing "Haah-uh-uh-h-h!" Again the man struck, then once more before Hessie sagged forward, limp and helpless. The first man let him slip easily to the floor.

Four men stood in a circle over Loomis as he lay there on the floor, and then a fifth man brought a flashlight into play, handed it to another, saying, "You hold this, Chester. I want to get his cuffs and keys."

Luther bent over the unconscious form and got the handcuffs out of the leather holder attached to Loomis's belt, snapped them on the chief deputy's wrists behind his back. Now he pulled a roll of adhesive tape out of his pocket, ripped off a five-inch strip, and taped it across the deputy's mouth. "All right, boys," he said briskly, "let's get him out of here. We don't want to do anything more in here that might lead somebody to us. Lida-Mae, you set those chairs back the way they were and sweep this room up. Take the lamp and broken glass with you and bury it all in the woods somewhere. Then you go on home to your kids and forget you ever left the house this evening. Anybody comes around asking questions, to-morrow or any other day, you just remember one thing: you were home in your own house with your neighbors, the Johnsons, and Chester and his wife. They came over to keep you company, knowing that Robbie left for Washington this morning. They stayed with you till sometime after midnight. You got that straight, Lida-Mae?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Luther. And I thank you again. I'll tell Robbie when he comes home and he'll come to thank you, too."

"You just go along and remember your story. Forget everything else no matter who you ever talk to from now on. Even these boys here or their wives. It just never happened at all. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir. I hear you."

"All right, boys. Let's get going."

They moved quickly now. Two of the men carried Hesse out of the shack toward the river, placed him in the rowboat. The five men got into it and settled themselves while two of them rowed soundlessly, dipping their rag-muffled oars into the river as they crossed to the far side, following the shoreline for almost two miles until they came to an opening that led directly into the Swamp. When the branch began to narrow considerably, the two rowers laid down their oars and took up the long poles from the bottom of the boat, used these to maneuver them along quietly through the narrower arm of water. Another branch loomed up on their right and they turned into it, poling their way along expertly. They continued in this manner, switching from one branch to another for almost an hour, and by this time Luther had no idea how many times they had turned to right or left, or how many similar branch

mouths they had passed. The boat moved efficiently through the intricate maze without stopping once, while Luther marveled that any human could remember the tangle of paths they had taken, even after hundreds of such trips; but the man in the bow of the boat, Langley Bole, guided them along smoothly and confidently, with all the assurance of a native of Regis walking through the Square in full daylight.

They came to a wider branch now, a fork that angled off into three directions, and Langley motioned his head to the left. After moving along for some fifty yards, the boat made its first halt at a motion from Langley, who held his hand upraised. The man in the stern, Chester Deebin, held both hands cupped to his mouth and gave a perfect imitation of a hoot owl. They listened and heard the call repeated faintly in the distance. Chester hooted twice and the call came back twice. A number of swamp birds, disturbed or frightened by the calls, began to chatter and scream and shriek across the Swamp, setting up a harrowing cacophony that reverberated and echoed from every direction.

Langley and Chester continued to pole the boat. At another point, some twenty minutes later, the same process was repeated and, when they received the answering calls, they continued on. About a mile farther ahead, the boat was poled into shore at a cleared landing point where a loading dock had been built and several long, narrow flatboats were tied up on either side of it. The five men got out and two of them pulled Hessie Loomis to his feet. Chester Deebin said, "All right now, Mist' Deppity, you c'n git up now. C'mon. We know you been awake for the last half hour or so. You ain' foolin' nobody. You c'n stan' on your own two feet now."

Hessie's figure straightened up and he planted his two feet about fourteen inches apart to steady himself. Luther came up behind him and fumbled with the key and handcuffs until they were unlocked. Loomis brought his hands around in front of him, rubbed his wrists, looked around him as if trying to get his bearings in this strange, wild place. Behind him was the water that, even if he could find his way through the puzzling maze, would eventually take his life since he could not swim for long. Before him, his captors stood about, watching him silently, attentively.

The moon was rising, large and yellow, just above the treetops, casting an eerie light over them. Beyond the thickset trees a short distance away, Loomis could make out the black, bulky outlines of a building against the lighter background of the deep blue sky.

No lights showed anywhere, but he could make out light curls of smoke moving lazily upward from the two tall stacks that came up out of the rooftops and stood like silent sentinels on guard. This, he surmised correctly, was one of the stills and bottling and casing units operated by the syndicate he had for so many years represented as collector and enforcer—one of the four units that had made him, by most standards, a comparatively wealthy man. And now this wealth that he had stored in a safety deposit box in the Regis National Bank, one in Houston, and another in New Orleans as an extra measure of insurance, what of them? What would happen to it all if he couldn't bluff or fight his way out of this thing that menaced him here? He wasted little time with useless surmising. He knew this was not a matter of simple revenge, a beating with a warning to go along with it. This, he knew with full seriousness and grim reality, was for keeps—for his life. No Negroes would have abducted him thus, not even taking the trouble to cover their faces with masks or handkerchiefs, or trying to disguise their voices, unless this was an act of finality for himself.

He would not sell out cheaply. He would try with words first.

"You know you ain't goin' a get away with this, now, don't you, boys?" he said in what was probably the softest, kindest tone he had used toward a male Negro in many years.

"What makes you think we ain't, mistuh?" Langley replied. "Why yo' think we brung you all the way out heah when we coulda done anything we wanted to you back in yo' fishing shack?"

"Well, why didn't you?" Loomis stalled for more time.

"'Cause then you'd a never knowed why, an' tha's somethin' you ought to know, Mist' Deppity."

"You know it's goin' a go special hard with every one of you when you get caught up with, don't you?"

Chester laughed lightly. "How come you figger it like that, Mist' Deppity?" he asked.

"I know who you are, that's why. Every last one of you coons."

"Shuh! That don't make no difference no more, mistuh. We'll even tell you who we are. Me, I'm Chester Deebin. You know me. I'm janitor in the sheriff's office ever since th' war ended. You must pass me by maybe half a dozen times ev'y day. This here is Langley Bole. He works in that theah Number Three still right behind them trees. This man, he's Dubbie Hook, jus' got home from th' Marines. He's delivery man for Mist' Maxwell's grocery."

At this point the man who had been standing in the shadow of the trees came up to the group. "Don't leave me out a this," he

said in a low deep baritone voice, eager to declare himself a member of the party. "I'm Walter Pike. You don't know me, Mist' Loomis, but you ought to know the name. You had my sister, Lucy Pike, in your jailhouse for about ten days. You remember her? She ask me to give you somethin' special to remember her for 'cause she got a lot to remember you for."

Hessie stood listening, fighting for some angle he could use on them, some bargaining wedge. Time. He needed time. He looked at the one figure whom no one had introduced as yet, who stood silently back in the shadows. "Who're you, nigger?" he asked.

Luther stepped out of the shadow and at the same time brought the flashlight into play on his own face, then cast it on Loomis's, caught the surprise and shock there. Hessie recovered quickly.

"Well, now, ain't that something?" he said. "The hero. Ol' man Radford's hero son-in-law. The Medal of Honor man who can't even keep old man Markland's boy out a his wife's pants."

Luther said, "Go ahead, Hessie, boy, but just you remember that everything you say now, you're going to pay for along with all the other things that're going to come out at your trial."

"Trial? What trial?" Hessie spat out. "Who's goin' a try me and where? And for what?"

"Hessie, you're on trial right now. Sure. Right this minute. Or I guess you could call it a drumhead court-martial. Every single one of these boys got a charge against you, and if we'd let all the folks in Buckeytown take a part in it who got something or other against you, we'd have to get us an Army transport to bring 'em all out here."

"And what's your partic'lar beef, hero?" Loomis said with a sneer.

"First, I'm personally representing Robbie Tilebin on behalf of his wife who set you up for this little party. Robbie being on his way back to Washington since this morning, I'm sort of standing in for him."

"You want me to defend myself against a high yella whore who's been after me for years?" Hessie scoffed.

"No, we don't expect you to defend yourself at all. We know what the score is all the way down the line. Just like Dubbie Hook, here. You remember his brother, Georgie Hook? He's the boy you took hold of by the wrist a couple of years ago and swung him into a tree face first, just like kids play crack-the-whip. Well, he lived, but his face got all busted up and his brains got kind of scrambled so that he can't walk straight or talk right or do much of anything except maybe breathe and stay alive so people in Buckeytown can

always feel pity for him and remember what a no-good bastard you are.

"Chester Deebin, now. You know why Chester got himself the job as a janitor in your jail, Hessie? On account of his wife spent some time in that special cell of yours behind Hogsnout's office while Chester was in the war fighting your fight. One whole week she was there and nobody even knew where. Chester, he waited a long time and finally he paid the other janitor to quit so's he could take the job and wait for the day when he could kill you in one way or another. We figure that this was a much simpler and better way. Walter Pike and Langley Bole, they got just as good reasons as the rest why they're here."

"And how about you, nigger-lover? How come you throwin' in against a white man?" Hessie asked coldly.

Luther was amazed at Hessie's coldness. This man knew he was marked for death. It was unthinkable that he could assume otherwise, since no colored men would kidnap the chief deputy and do anything short of murder and expect to come out of it alive. Hessie knew they must kill him and yet he stood there, icy-cool, listening to the charges against him without showing any outward signs of fear. A man might be able to hide his feelings by standing erect, holding himself from trembling, but surely he must give himself away when he spoke. What might be going on in his brain, no one could tell, but Luther felt compelled to admire the man's icy-veined coolness in the face of what he must know for certain could be no less than death.

"Me? Well, Hessie, maybe nothing for myself. Like I said, for one thing, I'm representing Robbie Tilebin who couldn't be here himself. For another, I can remember a man dying when he didn't have to, a man who didn't do a thing in the world to you. You killed him, another white man, because you thought it would make another man happy, maybe help you along in your job, even though it might help ruin the life of the woman he was in love with and who loved him. You remember him, Mr. Chief Deputy?" There was a moment of total silence as every eye was upon Loomis and Loomis's forehead wrinkled up in thought, evidently reaching back in his memory for recall. "You remember a schoolteacher by the name of Harwick?" Luther added.

Loomis snorted. "Hell, hero, he was just another guy who was gettin' inside your wife's pants, though I'll admit she wasn't your wife then. Ain' no tellin' how many got there before you did, is there?" he jibed.

Luther said, "Well, I guess that ends the trial as far as I'm concerned. I think there's been enough charges from everybody present so that we can take the case to the jury. I'll just talk it over with them for a minute and we'll let you know what the verdict is, Loomis. You might just as well stand there, 'cause there ain't no place for you to run. You're on a little spit of land that's got water on three sides of it and a jungle behind it, so you don't have much of a chance to run anywhere."

The two minutes Hessie waited were the longest he could remember in his lifetime, longer even than the minutes he spent the night he returned to his home in Texas and found his wife's body with one of her own stockings tied about her neck. His fingers began to clench and unclench with nervousness, perspiration rolling down his face, the dampness of his body making his shirt sticky and wet. The group of four Negroes and the white man ringed about him again.

"Well, Mr. Loomis," Luther said, "we all took a vote and decided that whatever we do, you ain't goin' a be tied up while it's being done. What's going to happen to you is we're goin' a give you a lot more chance than you ever gave any of the people you dealt with. We're not going to cuff your hands again. If you want to fight, you'll be accommodated. If you don't, you're goin' a get killed anyway."

Hessie flung his arms out and upward, flexing his muscles, then brought his hands together in a kneading action. The four Negroes stood in a circle around him while Luther took up his position outside the ring.

"What's the matter, hero, you afraid to join your nigger friends?" Loomis taunted.

"No, Hessie, boy," Luther replied. "I'm standing here just to see that everything goes off all right. You get past them, then I'll be here for you to finish me off, or maybe it'll be the other way around. Besides, me being special prosecutor and judge of this trial, the jury's entitled to first crack at you, seeing they been sinned against more than me."

"You know this is murder, don't you, white boy, and you niggers? You know Sheriff Bartly ain't goin' a rest until he finds out who done this thing. You think you can escape a murder?"

"Shuh! You makin' a big fuss over nothin', Mist' Deppity," Chester Deebin called out.

"Less'n nothin', iffen you ask me," added Walter Pike.

Dubbie Hook said, "You gotten away with murder for a long

time now, Mist' Deppity. No reason why we can't. Leastways, we goin' a try."

Loomis stood with his hands dangling loosely at his sides, wondering at these men for having given him even this much—to remove the handcuffs and allow him to fight it out. He tried to sum up this night so far, knew that he would do all he could to take at least one or two of these hated Negroes with him, Luther Dorman, too, if he could manage to get his hands on him. In that same flash he wondered what would happen if he could kill them all, including Dorman. What would happen then? Could he find his way out of the Swamp? He looked over the heads of these men who had begun to circle about him slowly, like coyotes out on the Texas plains circling around a trapped heifer. He could see the black outlines of the still building, knew that if he could survive, this would be his escape. Someone worked in that building and he could force them to take him out under threat of death. But, he thought grimly, he would have to kill five men in order to earn that chance.

From this new idea of a possible escape, however remote, he drew a certain strength, a feeling of confidence he had not been able to command some few minutes earlier. He was not afraid to face death, knowing as he had for years that, as he had lived his life, he must one day die in violence; but if he must die, he thought now, he didn't want his death to go for naught, useless, not out here in a filthy swamp at the hands of four dirty, stinking niggers and one renegade white man. He licked the salt of the perspiration from his lips, tasted the blood inside his mouth, watched closely as the four Negroes continued to circle about him, taking their positions close in so that he could not escape them. Loomis shrugged his shoulders back several times, curled his fingers into hard fists, flexed them open and shut, and, like a professional fighter, cleared his nostrils of phlegm so that he would not be hampered by a lack of air when his breathing would become heavy and labored from physical exertion.

Four niggers and a white renegade, he thought again. I'd sure like to break through and get that nigger-loving hero first, the no-good son-of-a-bitch. I get him, the others could go hang. I killed enough of 'em in my time. But Dorman. I'd sure like to get my hands around his neck just once. Only once. No amount of pulling by the other four could tear me away from him. He'd be just as dead as I'd be.

"It's still murder," he said aloud, trying to delay the inevitable,

"and every last one of you is goin' a pay for it. You know Bartly. He'll come after every one of you till he gets all five, even if it takes the rest of his life."

"Murder is what you call it, Loomis," Luther said. "Well, we got another name for it. The same one that was used for old Hitler when he killed himself in that bunker of his with his wife. Retribution. That's what they said it was. Retribution. That's one hell of a fine word and I sure like the sound of it, so I ain't goin' a waste it. For instance, when Robbie Tilebin comes back from that hospital in Washington and he asks me, 'Luther, what you reckon happened to old Hessie Loomis?' I'm going to look right at Robbie and say to him, 'Onliest thing I can figure out, Robbie, is that it was just Retribution.'"

Suddenly Loomis lunged forward and hit Langley Bole's chin with a powerful right and Langley went down to the ground. Before he could complete another swing, Walter Pike had rushed in to circle Loomis's arms, but Hessie avoided his grasp and his arms were free. He struck Pike a glancing blow on the side of his head and Pike went to his knees, circling his arms about the deputy's legs. Loomis stepped back only far enough to free his right leg and brought his knee up under Pike's chin just as Chester Deebin and Dubbie Hook rushed him. Hook hit Loomis twice, a hard right to the jaw, the left catching him on the chest. Walter Pike had rolled away, hardly conscious from the knee blow to his chin, but Langley Bole was back now, leaping in from the side, getting one strong arm around the deputy's throat. Chester Deebin came in again, but Hessie's lashing feet arched upward and caught him in the stomach and threw him backwards to the ground. Luther stood back watching tensely, the perspiration of excitement wetting his shirt and jacket. Bole's grip on Loomis's throat loosened, Hessie twisted sharply to get out of the hold, aided by the body slick created by the sweat of both men. Just as he tore out of the grip, Dubbie Hook caught him in the mouth with a crushing blow, then another. Hessie threw a hard punch and caught Walter Pike's nose, felt the crunch of bone in his knuckle, but Hook had the the range now and was delivering one cruel blow after the other to Hessie's face and chin.

Blood began to stream from Hessie's mouth. His nose was broken in several places, his left ear ripped and bleeding, his mouth and jaw numb. He steadied himself, straightened up from the semi-crouch, turned away to free himself from the clutching hands of Chester Deebin, who was on his knees in front of him. He drew back his right foot and kicked out at Chester, catching the center

of his chest. Chester fell back gasping with pain. Loomis was almost in the clear, except for Dubbie Hook and Luther Dorman, who stood at the sidelines watching. One more, he thought. One more and I can get to Dorman. He braced himself against Hook, who came in leading with his left. Loomis ducked forward and down out of the way of the oncoming blow, then realized too late that he had been suckered into the move by the ex-Marine who brought the side of his open right hand down hard on Hessie's neck, dropping him to the ground. Hook was on him, pulling him up to his feet, slashing him with sharp punishing blows as he panted, "These, they fo' my brothuh Georgie. You—no—good—white—!"

Dubbie continued the punishment as Hessie fell again to his knees, trying futilely to crawl away from the flailing fists that pursued him, pummeled him cruelly, chopped at him with short, vicious blows that hurt, yet were unable to end the punishment by bringing on unconsciousness. He was blinded with his own blood, dirt, and salty perspiration that stung and bit into his flesh, yet he struggled once again to get to his feet.

Walter Pike, Chester Deebin, and Langley Bole had gotten up now and stood to one side, ready to come to Dubbie Hook's aid, warned off by his cry, "Keep out a this, you guys. Leave him to me."

Hessie faced about at the sound of Hook's voice, unable to see him through eyes that were swollen and almost entirely closed. He staggered around toward Dubbie, who put out one hand to steady the deputy, then unleashed a tremendous blow to Hessie's jaw. Hessie hung up for a moment, then fell to his knees, then face downward into the dirt, unconscious.

Walter Pike moved in, touched Hessie's body with the tip of his shoe, stooped, and turned him over on his back. Luther beamed the flashlight toward him, turned it off when he saw the mass of battered, bleeding flesh that was Loomis's almost unrecognizable face. The Negroes kneeled in the dirt, panting heavily from their work.

"When you fellows get rested," Luther said, "we'll break out the canvas and get him out of here. We don't want to show any blood in the boat or anywhere else."

"He still livin', ain' he?" Bole asked.

"He's still living," Luther replied.

"Well, now, Mr. Luther, why don't you leave the rest a this to us? Like you said, this is a job for people who got the most ag'inst him. We'll take him back in the boat an' leave you off near his place

where you parked yo' car. Then we'll take care of him an' you don't know anything about how he ended up."

"Sure," Walter Pike agreed. "You done enough, just gettin' us together and helpin' us to figure out how to trap him. From here, we do the rest. That all right with you, Mist' Luther?"

"If you want it that way, boys, we'll do it that way. But I thought the idea was to leave him out here in the Swamp when we finished him."

"We talked it over 'mongst ourselves, Mist' Luther," Hook said. "We decided back earlier we goin' a do it our way. We leave him out here, Ol' Hogsnout'll just keep on lookin' fo' him till he fin' something. We leave him in town where he c'n be foun' an' Ol' Hogsnout, he'll know just like everybody else what happened to his deppity, an' one day he won't look no more."

"Okay," Luther said, agreeing with the logic of Dubbie's argument, "it's your party from here in. Let's get the canvas and wrap him in it. Then smooth this dirt out and hide any blood that's showin' on it. You got to get that car of his away from the fishing shack so it'll take a while before Old Hogsnout finds out just where the ruckus started. You need all the time you can get before they start checking this thing out. One thing is certain—no matter what happens, who they suspect or take in, nobody here knows anything about it. You all got your alibis worked out and I'll have mine, too. One man talks and we'll all get it. But I'll tell all of you right now: whoever he is, if he talks, he won't live either, no matter what Hogsnout promises him. He'll get it just like the rest of us, so if you want to think of your wives and families and how they'll make out without you, you'll keep your mouths shut. You get home, get rid of any marks Loomis left on you before you go out in public. You understand that, all of you?"

"Yes, sir, Mist' Luther," Chester Deebin said solemnly, "we understand, and don't you worry none. Ain't nobody here goin' a do any talkin' at all. Ain't nobody even goin' a tell his wife or bes' friend nothin', either, 'cause if he does, he ain't goin' a be alive hisself much longer."

He looked around at the others and they nodded in agreement.

Luther went to Hessie's prone body and searched his pockets for the keys to his car. Then he and Langley Bole went to the rowboat and lifted out the flat pile of canvas that had once been part of a tent. They carried it back to the clearing and rolled Loomis into it, wrapped him in it securely, then carried the bundle to the boat while Dubbie Hook kicked at the dirt where they had fought and wiped away all signs of blood on the ground.

Deebin and Bole took up the poles again and steered them out of the Swamp, moving more rapidly now, breaking out into the clear Welcome River somewhat less than an hour later, then rowed south to where their trip had begun. Luther leaped out of the rowboat and pulled it close to the small pier while the others got out. Pike remained in the boat to lift Loomis's still inert body, then Hook and Bole carried it toward the car that Deebin was unlocking. They placed the canvas-encased Loomis in the back section on the floor. Chester Deebin and Langley Bole got in the front while Pike and Hook sat on the back seat, their feet resting lightly on their cargo. The car's motor turned over smoothly.

"You fellows got to remember to be extra careful," Luther said. "You make one little mistake and get picked up with him in the car and you know what can happen to you. Where—?"

"You jus' forget all about it, Mist' Luther," Bole said. "We goin' a take care a this thing our own way from here on. We jus' want to thank you for helpin' us out."

The motor purred on a rising note and the car moved out. Luther watched as it gained the top of the rise and turned right into County Road toward Regis. He walked across the path into the stand of trees where he had parked his own car, got in, and started the motor. All he could think of now in this exhilarated mood was Ruth-Rachel, who lay asleep in the cottage where he had left her to await his return.

5.

The car moved along the darkened street. It had come almost into the center of Regis from Buckeytown with each of the four Negroes fully aware of what could happen to them if a patrol car from the sheriff's office saw and recognized the unmarked police car and decided to investigate its presence here. Still, they had been in complete agreement on how this night must come to its end. It was well after two in the morning before they left the woods to which they had driven after they had left Luther. Now, in the complete stillness of the night, they came quietly up Medairy, through Davis, avoiding the Square, knowing that the front of the Sheriff's Building would be well lighted. At the rear of the building facing Sycamore was a large parking lot that was used by civilian employees of the sheriff's office by day. The garage was on the first floor to the rear of the building, with entrances that opened on both sides of the building, there being none at the rear. Their objective was to get behind the building without being seen. At this hour the problem was a small one.

Davis Street was mostly residential and completely dark at this late hour. The car moved into Sycamore and they drew within half a block of the parking lot behind the Sheriff's Building. Bole switched off the lights and the smooth-running car eased itself into the empty lot. Chester Deebin put a hand on Langley Bole's arm and the car braked to an easy stop. Chester turned to the men on the back seat.

"You-all ready back there?"

"We ready," Dubbie Hook replied.

"Okay. When I give the sign, you open the back door an' get set. When I tell you to let go, you know what you got to do. When you do it, we're goin' a pull out a here mighty fast, so hang on."

Both men in the rear section of the car nodded. Chester raised his hand and Pike opened the back door closest to the building side. Hook reached down and began to wrestle the canvas-clad form closer to Pike. "Faster," Chester urged.

"Fast as I can," Pike murmured between clenched teeth.

"Git him out fast, f'God's sakel" Bole exclaimed under his breath.

"I can't let 'im go till I pull the pins. Okay! Okay! I got it!" He tugged at the pins of the two hand grenades that had been taped to Loomis's body beneath the canvas. "I got 'em!" he repeated fiercely.

Hook and Pike pushed the body out of the car accompanied by Hook's sharp, "*Git out a herel Fast!*"

Even before the body could hit the paved parking lot, the car, urged by Bole's sudden hard jab on the accelerator, lurched down Sycamore, tires screeching in protest as it turned down Davis again, moving swiftly away from the Square area. As they made the first turn, the blast of the twin explosions reached them. For a few moments the men were quiet, then Bole said, "I guess Ol' Hogsnout, he'll be knowin' in a couple a seconds that his chief deppity been special delivered to him."

The car pulled into a narrow alley, the ignition was switched off, and the men got out of the car and scattered in different directions, careful to remain in the dark shadows.

6.

Exhausted when he returned to waken Ruth-Rachel in the cottage, emotionally and physically drained when, two hours later he dropped her off at Lutie's and continued on to the Hall and got into bed, Luther was awake and alert at seven. He lay in bed with his eyes wide open. At first he tried to fall back into his former

sleep, then he gave up and allowed the events of the night before to come back to him, savoring each detail in his mind, producing a sensation of elation that only complete and satisfactory accomplishment can induce. It was an event—a cherished victory—he wished he could tell to someone, someone close enough who would understand and appreciate it; someone like—well, like Dale Hagen.

He felt, in some curious way, that a debt had been discharged to Robbie Tilebin, that he could face Robbie on more equal terms now; that Robbie's hard-earned Bronze Star was no longer more important or valuable than his own unearned Medal of Honor.

He wondered how his four recent companions had finished Loomis off, tried to visualize the end of this man whom they hated more than anyone else on earth, far more than the enemy they had fought in the war. He reminded himself that until someone actually told him about it, or he read about it in the newspapers or heard it over the radio, he must under no circumstances make mention of Loomis's death to anyone, for he might fumble the details or add something unknown to public sources and thus direct suspicion to himself.

No slips, Luther, he cautioned himself. He dozed for a while and then came awake to the distinctive motor of Marcus's car starting. He looked at the bedside clock. It was nearing nine-thirty. He wanted to get into town to hear the news, hear for himself the local reaction to Loomis's death, be witness to the consternation in the face of Old Hogsnout, who must know, with fear, that a similar fate could easily come to himself some night. He got out of bed, shaved and dressed quickly, then ran lightly down the stairs, his hand already groping in his trousers pocket for the keys to his car. He would have his breakfast in town and get the early details before—

"Luther."

It was Bethann's voice calling to him from the dining room where she sat alone at the table having her breakfast. He stopped, turned back to the double-doored opening, looked inquisitively at his wife.

"Luther, do you mind? I want to talk with you. Unless you're in a terrible hurry—"

He hesitated, but only for a second. He must not in any way show any difference in the way he acted on this particular morning, not show that he was in a hurry, unable to give a convincing reason for his haste.

"Sure," he said, coming into the room and standing behind a chair opposite her.

"You haven't had breakfast, have you?"

"No," he replied. "I'm not hungry this morning."

"Then have some coffee. I'm sure you're not in too great a hurry for that," she said with a pleasant smile.

So she had already noticed that he had been hurrying. Casually, he dropped into the chair and said indolently, "Hurry? What's there to hurry for? Sure, I'd like a cup of coffee."

"I'll ring for some hot."

She rang and Sudie came shuffling in to remove the silver pot, returned within a few moments and poured fresh coffee for both without comment. It had been well understood long ago that neither Sudie nor Newton would greet Luther, or acknowledge his presence, unless a special occasion demanded it of them. At this point no one seemed to care any longer. Sudie ambled back to the kitchen.

Luther picked up his cup and began to sip the hot coffee, looking at Bethann over its rim, thinking of the envy men must feel for him when they saw her beauty; and still, there was the utter lack of response in him for her now, just as there was none in her for him. He thought suddenly of the remark Loomis had made the night before, about Ross Markland and her, and wondered now if there were any truth to what he had said. He wondered about it, and why he could not feel upset or angry about it. That night in her play cabin in the woods had ended every thread of the former closeness between them, even though it had been responsible for uniting them in this now-impossible situation.

Bethann put her cup down. "Luther," she said, "I had a long talk with Daddy last night. He told me all about—about the arrangement he discussed with you."

Luther met her eyes without words.

"I'd like to talk about it with you," she continued. "I'm sure you are as uncomfortable about everything as I am. Even Daddy admitted it had all been a big mistake, that he had agreed with you for only one reason: Harriet. Now that everything has been taken care of, there's no need to go on with this play-acting, is there?"

"We talked about it, like Mr. Marcus said."

"You agreed, didn't you?"

"Well, in a way, I guess I did."

"That was more than a week ago. Have you come to a definite decision about it?"

"I been thinking on it." Luther searched his mind for a reason to delay the final commitment. "Fifteen thousand dollars, Mr.

Marcus said. That's not as much these days as it used to be."

"I thought it was more than \$15,000," she said.

"Well, there's a \$5000 note and the legal fees—that I don't think I ought to pay for anyway—plus the living expenses I'd be put to while I was out there—doing—"

"Establishing residence," Bethann finished helpfully.

"That's right."

"Luther, I want this thing over and done with. As soon as possible. I know Daddy would force it in some way if you balked—"

His head bobbed up quickly. "Like he forced that—other fellow?"

The words had been said easily, but now he saw the quick trembling, a turbulence strike her with shocking severity. She turned away as though from a distasteful vision, and suddenly he felt a surge of pity, sorry now that he had brought this wave of unhappiness back to her. He sat silently, contrite, not knowing how to apologize or soften the blow. She turned back to face him, her hands gripping each other in her lap below the surface of the table, but he could see the convulsive movements of distress in her arms and shoulders. Her face was considerably paler now.

"Luther," she said in clipped words, "I'm sure another \$5000 or \$10,000 won't matter now, if I ask Daddy. I have enough to give it to you myself without his knowing about it, if he should object. Will you give me an answer now?"

Luther's eyes narrowed as she spoke. There was no harshness in her tone. She said the words evenly, kindly, with the same matter-of-factness she would display toward an inept servant, a groom or gardener who must be dismissed. The additional \$5000 or \$10,000, so easy for her to come by, was the balm offering, the usual "two weeks' pay to tide you over while you're looking for another job."

Now coolness replaced the earlier warmth he had felt as a lump rose in his throat at the "dismissal notice." It hadn't been nearly as bad coming from Marcus; but from her, who had slept with Garrett Harwick and borne his child, had slept with him, Luther Dorman, probably with Ross Markland and possibly with others . . . "Well," people would say, "he wasn't no more'n a sharecropper boy to begin with, so what the hell? A medal can't change a man from that, can it? He's had himself a lot of fun bein' a hero, beddin' down with the prettiest an' richest gal in the whole blamed county, ain't he? An' I guess ol' Marcus, he'll probilily put a few dollars in Luther's pocket for not makin' any trouble, so what's he lost? He c'n always go back to bein' a 'cropper."

Bethann saw the mood of asperity as it came over him. "Don't

be angry, Luther," she said. "We both know it was wrong from the beginning and impossible as it is. This way, neither of us will ever be free to find our own happiness."

"Like you want to find with your friend, Ross Markland?" he snapped suddenly.

She didn't flinch from the accusation, showed no surprise that he was aware of Ross. "Probably more like your own with the widow of one of your oldest and closest friends," she said quietly, watching his head jerk upward in a malevolent stare. "Mrs. Dale Hagen," she added. "Luther, please. Let's not get into a fight about this. Daddy has known about you and Ruth-Rachel Hagen for months. Probably since it began between you. He told me about it last night. But it makes no difference to me. You can come back after the the divorce and marry her if you want. All we need to do is work out a satisfactory arrangement between us and have it over and done with."

He picked up his cup and sipped at it, but the coffee was cold. He poured more into the cup from the silver pot. It eased some of the tension in him. What the hell, he thought. They know, and Mr. Marcus could give me plenty of trouble if he wanted to. If I pull this off, I can still give it back to him. More than he can handle. Me, the sharecropper's son, by God, toppling the high and mighty Marcus Radford off his solid gold throne with my own footprint right smack on his butt!

"All right, Miss Bethann," he said with a smile. "I'll give you my answer right here and now. Twenty-five thousand plus the note for \$5000 and all expenses. I'll leave it up to you to work out the details with Mr. Marcus."

In town Luther ran into the double-barreled excitement of Hessie Loomis's murder. Certainly his shock, when he learned that Hessie had been blown to death by live grenades, was most genuine. He had no idea that any of his companions of the night before had been so armed; yet he knew that it was not unreasonable that they were. All four were war veterans who had seen combat. Robbie had chosen his men well.

Everywhere in the Square and on the streets that ringed it small knots of people were gathered in conversation, everyone seeming to be talking at once. Even on the benches the old men had finally given up their games and stolid, aimless gazing to join in the animated discussions, listening, nodding silently, voicing opinions,

spitting their tobacco-stained saliva into the clipped grass and hedges. Some wandered from one group to another to listen to what might be a more recent version of the happening. Now and then a newcomer would bustle into a group with some new word from the sheriff's office.

Deputies came and went, scurrying to and from the Sheriff's Building, their official cars racing in and out of the narrow drive-ways that flanked the building, tires and sirens screeching, red warning lights twirling. This was almost as big an event as VE or VJ Days, some said.

Luther parked his car on the bank's lot and got the news firsthand from Ben, who pointed to the lot behind the Sheriff's Building where a ring of people were gathered around the exact spot where the explosion had occurred, marked by a ragged hole in the ground. He walked down the paved space between the bank and its neighboring building to the street entrance on the Square and saw the unusual activity, people knotted up to discuss the brutal murder of the night before, yet displaying no great sorrow for the victim, no particular sadness over his death. Mostly, it was anger that a murder as violent as this could be committed, no doubt by Negroes, who probably had the greatest number and most varied of reasons to hate Loomis to this degree.

Inside the bank Cass Worden looked up as Luther approached his desk, nodded his usual silent "Good morning" in his usual, reserved manner. Luther mouthed his usual silent "Good morning, Cass," as he prepared to pass by on his way to his own office, but now Worden, for the first time that Luther could remember, got up from behind his desk and came to the rail with the obvious intention of making conversation. Luther paused and waited.

"I guess you've heard about Loomis," Worden stated.

Luther nodded. "They know who did it?" he asked.

"No. Not yet. Bartly's going around like a madman. He was in to see Mr. Marcus earlier. Never saw a man go to pieces so badly." Worden snickered, a leer on his face. "You'd almost believe the gossip that there was something between those two, the way he's carrying on."

Luther, a good three inches taller than Cass Worden, looked down at the man, surprised that he was capable of making the observation.

"I don't know, Cass," Luther replied. "I never knew either one of them too well. Loomis was an ornery bastard anyway, so I don't guess there'll be many crying over him, except maybe the sheriff."

"The rumor's around that some niggers over in Buckeytown did it."

Luther froze for a second, reached for a cigarette to hide the sudden fear that enveloped him with this direct remark. Worden held a match for the cigarette Luther had taken from a pack and put between his lips. "Hell," Luther said coolly, "that's about the most natural thing could come to their minds, I guess. You can't find anybody else to blame something on, blame it on Buckeytown." He shook his head negatively. "If they did it, how do you figure they'd come all the way over here to dump him out and explode him, when it would've been so much easier to do it there? Or just kill him and dump him in the river and let him be found a couple of days later? Niggers'd be crazy to take a chance on getting caught with a thing like that on this side of County Road, wouldn't they?"

Worden shrugged. "I guess so. Sounds logical, anyhow, but you never know, Luther. You never know what the next man'll do. If the talk around town gets any stronger, I wouldn't want to be around Buckeytown tonight," he added meaningfully.

The thought of a wholesale raid on the Negro community by self-styled vigilantes and homemade Kluxers made Luther shudder. Not in his lifetime had he known of a lynching in Regis, or of a raid such as Worden was suggesting; but he had heard stories of such horrors in other parts of the state and from surrounding states, had seen a number of sickening photographs circulated of victims of such brutal affairs. It would take only a few action-starved agitators to start it going full blast, with some of the sheriff's deputies, urged on from behind the lines by Will Bartly, leading the way.

He shrugged at Worden's last remark and went on to his office. Miss Abelard nodded to him with a smile, taking her cue from Cass Worden. Heretofore, she had always been busy whenever Luther was anywhere close by and had never really acknowledged his presence in any way. Miss Marshall, Marcus's secretary, nodded briefly to him, curt, unsmiling. He walked past her desk into his own office and closed the door behind him.

So far, so good. They knew nothing. They were only guessing that Buckeytown had been behind the assault and murder. Perhaps wiser heads would prevail and any talk of vigilante action would blow over, be dispelled and eventually forgotten. If it happens, Luther thought, it will happen tonight. If it goes past tonight, it'll be too late to whip anybody up into doing anything about it. Tonight or not at all.

He removed his jacket and hung it in the small closet, then sat

at his desk, toying with the pen-and-pencil set before him. Luther reached inside the center top drawer and pulled out a few sheets of unprinted white paper and began to pencil some figures in a vague reassessment of new values.

If, he reasoned, he could count on there still being \$195,000 in Marcus's hiding place at home, and if he could plan on getting \$25,000 from Marcus to buy him off—he put the two figures down and totaled them quickly—*two hundred and twenty thousand dollars clear!* Marcus had said he would get the money when he, Luther, returned from Reno. But that, Luther saw, wouldn't do at all. Once he left the Hall, he would never again have the opportunity of coming back to collect. He would have to insist that the payment be made *before* he left for Reno.

How could he work it? An hour passed before the pieces in his mind formed a workable design.

For instance, he would ask Marcus that the \$25,000 be paid him *in advance of his leaving, and in the form of a cashier's check for safety*. Also, that the traveling and expense money be given him in the same form—or in traveler's checks. Now, he thought, you're thinking with your brains! A cashier's check and traveler's checks were the same as cash and Marcus would have no excuse to go to his hiding place to withdraw the cash from that source. He smiled with self-satisfaction and approval.

Take the next step. His clothes would be packed and ready. He would move it all out after getting the money from the hiding place. Then he would arrange to pick up the cashier's check and the traveler's checks at the bank. Next, he would get Ruth-Rachel, who would be packed and ready to leave.

Carrie, he thought. He wouldn't have time to see Carrie if he did it that way. And if he wouldn't be coming back to Regis, he'd have to see her before he left. No, he'd have to revise his timetable so he could see Carrie, maybe leave her an envelope with a few thousand dollars in it for an extra something she might want to buy, might need for something important later on—or in case Fred got stuck for some cash to pay his bills. The crucial thing was to get out of town fast and stay away until after Marcus was taken out of play by the federal authorities. Meanwhile, he and Ruth-Rachel would be moving around, waiting for some word from Bledso, waiting at some dreamed-of tropical paradise in the Pacific or on an island somewhere in the Caribbean. He would think about Carrie and Fred later. They had each other and the two girls; and there would probably be more of their own in the future.

What happens, he wondered further, when I pull out of here with Ruth-Rachel? In a few days, maybe, Marcus goes to his hiding place and finds out the money is gone. And some of his files. It won't take him more'n three seconds to figure out who got away with it. He won't have any proof, but that never stopped Marcus Radford before. Then what? He can't make a public stink about it. I'd tell about Bethann and me and the faked marriage. I'll deny everything else and the papers will be with me. He can't send anybody after me to get it because he could figure I'd be smart enough not to be carrying the money with me if I had enough brains to find his hiding place. Hell, the extra files I take when I get the money will be like an insurance policy against his playing rough with me. Meanwhile, Bledso will have the 1940 file and Marcus won't know exactly what happened to it until Bledso's outfit lowers the boom on him like a ton of rocks.

Even if he gets past Bledso's boys, maybe he'd figure to say nothing and wait till I come back to Regis. Sure. If he tries anything with me while I'm in Reno, he's got to figure that Ruth-Rachel being with me, she knows as much as I do about the missing files. And if he puts me out of the way, he's got to put her away, too, and that would start getting a little too complicated, even for Marcus Radford.

Suddenly he smiled with full confidence. *I'll work it out*, he said to himself. *Hell, this is like shooting ducks in a barrell*

Chapter 16

1.

Marcus Radford made Luther Dorman's timetable problem much easier than Luther himself could have planned or asked for. On the following day Marcus intercepted Luther on his way back to the bank from lunch. Marcus was standing at the outside rail talking to Cass Worden when Luther came in and walked past the two men, heading toward his office. Just as he came abreast of them, Marcus turned and said pleasantly, "Luther, would you mind waiting for me in my office? I've got a little matter I'd like to discuss with you."

Luther nodded, went through the gate past Miss Marshall's desk and into Marcus's office. He took a cigarette from the box on the desk, lit it with the massive silver lighter, and sat in the tan leather side chair waiting. Within a few moments Marcus came in, Miss Marshall on his heels with a handful of letters to be signed. "Not now, Miss Marshall," Marcus said, "and I don't want to be disturbed by any calls or callers until I let you know that I'm free."

"Yes, sir," she said in her dark, sullen manner and backed out of the room.

Marcus leaned back in the big chair, took a cigar from his pocket, and puffed it aglow before he turned to Luther. "I had a talk with Bethann last night, Luther," he began. "Have you had enough time to think our little business matter over?"

Luther said, "I've thought it over. Miss Bethann and I talked about the terms—"

Marcus held up a broad hand, said expansively, "No question about it, Luther. Bethann suggested a \$10,000 bonus for performance in good faith and I agreed with her. Also, she suggested you might like to have the car you're driving. I agreed with that, too, and I'll take steps to transfer the title to your name. Now, I'd like to get the matter settled as soon as possible." He hesitated, drew deeply on his cigar, then added, "Before I leave town."

Luther's ears picked up the new note. Marcus continued. "Today is Tuesday and I'm planning on a trip to Chancellor for a few days beginning on Friday. I'd like to make all the arrangements by then. Is that convenient for you?" he asked magnanimously.

Luther nodded. "Except for one thing."

"What is that?"

Luther took a deep breath. "Well, I'd like to get the \$25,000 before I leave for Reno. I'd like to have a cashier's check for it so I can cash it or deposit it and be able to draw against it if I need it. And I'd like to have the traveling and expense money in traveler's checks. If I can get that by Friday afternoon," he added, looking up at Marcus to see if this might or might not suit his fancy, "I'll be on my way first thing Saturday morning."

Marcus flashed a studied look at his son-in-law. "All right, Luther," he said, getting to his feet to call the conference to a close, "I'll arrange it that way. I'll call Dan Cornell and have him prepare some papers for your signature. You'll pick up the check and traveler's checks from him."

"And the title to the car?" Luther added.

"And the title to the car," Marcus agreed.

2.

Late that afternoon Luther came out of Haverstraw's Barber Shop where he had gone for the dual purpose of a haircut and the latest news, which is to say, the local gossip. There was one alarming aspect: the word of a sheriff's deputy that the murder was thought to have been committed either in Buckeytown or the Swamp, with the latter a better bet.

"What was left a Hessian," the authority had told the occupant of the second chair, "they scraped dirt and mud off of and analyzed it in the hospital lab."

"And?" a waiting patron had asked.

The authority nodded with pursed lips. "The very same kind," he stated definitely.

"Shuh!" another patron commented. "That don't prove nothin' Nothin' at all," he declared waspishly.

"You know more'n the doctors in the lab?" the authority asked with some rising heat in his voice.

"Not when it comes to medicine, no," the second man affirmed, "but when it comes to dirt, I say, yes, by sure God, I do. You take that there dirt over in Buckeytown or the Swamp, it ain't not one bit any different from the dirt around here. Within two-three blocks

a here, the hospital or any other danged place around here, you got open fields. Now you go scoop up a bucket a that there dirt and you ain't goin' a find it one bit different than any other kind around here for miles."

"You such a big expert on dirt, how come you don't go to the sheriff and—?"

"Shuh! Will Bartly, he knows it as much as I do. Or any of the rest a you," the man insisted. "They just want to pin it down somewhere, they goin' a have to do better'n what they done so far, by God. Dirt! Pfui! Now I'll tell you all this much—"

"You want to continue this scientific debate on dirt or do you want a shave without your throat getting slashed?" the barber asked as he held the glistening razor poised over the speaker's face.

"I— Go ahead and shave me," the man said.

Luther was out of his chair, paid the barber and called, "So long," and walked toward the door. Those present called out, "So long, Sergeant," in return. He walked back toward the bank, relieved that his earlier, blacker mood had been somewhat dispelled by time, the deal he had set with Marcus, the discussion he had just walked away from. There would, he felt, be no concerted action on Buckeytown.

As he passed the Sheriff's Building, Will Bartly came out of the glass-sheeted entrance and down the steps, his rotund figure bobbing briskly toward his official car standing at the curb.

"Hello, Sheriff," Luther called. Bartly swung around to reply.

"Hello, Luther." He came to a sudden halt. "Say, your daddy-in-law ain't in his office right now, is he?"

"Not at the moment, Sheriff. He left about an hour ago. Anything I can do for you?"

"No. I guess not, Luther. I guess not." Bartly began to move toward the curb again.

"You got any idea who could have done a thing like that to Hessie?" Luther asked.

Again Bartly stopped and turned, thoughtfully massaging his stubbled chin between thumb and fingers of his right hand. "Maybe. Maybe," he wheezed. He looked around to make sure he would not be overheard, then leaned forward and spoke in a confidential manner and tone. "I think we just found something—" The deputy at the wheel of Bartly's official car had started the motor, was racing it to attract the sheriff's attention. "I'll see you sometime tomorrow, Luther. You tell Mr. Marcus if you see him." He waddled toward the waiting car to Luther's, "Sure, Sheriff. I'll do that."

He met Ruth-Rachel just after dark as they had planned, and automatically he turned the car toward the river. He had so much to carry around in his head, so much he wanted to tell her, yet he did not feel in the mood for talking over his plans. He knew he must keep the discussion with Bledso as well as his deal with Marcus a secret, even from this woman he could not get enough of; must not even hint that they would be leaving until he would call her on Saturday morning, give her a bare hour, or even less, to pack and be ready when he stopped at Lutie's to pick her up there for the last time. The latest timetable, once he concentrated on it, had worked out fine. It was all so starkly simple. . . .

Ruth-Rachel's voice brought him back to reality. "You worried about last night, Luther?" she asked.

"Worried? No, not at all."

"I heard about it on the radio this morning," she said.

"I didn't have no hand in that part of it."

"I thought it was all the same thing, no matter who does it. One or ten, everybody's just as guilty as the one who does it."

"I guess so, but they don't know anything." The picture of Bartly came back to him, the words as they came out of the little fat man's porcine mouth. "Old Hogsnout's running around like a turkey with his head just shot off, trying to make people think he's onto something, but he's just whistlin' Dixie, is all he's doing."

"I hope you're right. I sure wouldn't want anything to happen to you," Ruth-Rachel said, moving closer to him across the seat, linking her left arm through his right.

Luther smiled with satisfaction at her nearness to him. "All's going to happen to us, honey, is nothing but good," he said, suddenly happy with the thought of their coming good fortune. "For both of us," he added.

"Like what?" she asked.

"Like something real good you've been wanting for a long time."

"You going to tell me or you want me to sit here and guess at it?"

"Listen, honey," he said with a quickening fierceness, "in a little while, a lot sooner than you think, I'm goin' a be—" He stopped just as suddenly as he had begun. Ruth-Rachel looked up into his face. "You goin' a be what?" she asked.

"Nothing, Ruth-Rachel. Let's— It's something I can't tell you right this minute, except this: you be ready for a big surprise real

soon. Baby, some of your biggest dreams, and mine, are about to come true. Believe me and don't ask me no more questions and I promise you that you won't be disappointed. You trust me, Ruth-Rachel?"

"Sure I do. If you say so, Luther, I believe you and trust you."

"Okay, honey. Let's just keep it that way for now."

She fell silent and took a firmer grip on his arm as they headed for the cottage on the river.

The next morning Luther made it a point to get down to the office early. He had not slept well, and during the night the sheriff's words came back to him, ringing in his mind like a knell of impending doom: "*I think we just found somethin'—*" And the sense of urgency in the driver of his car, racing the motor to call Bartly away. What, if anything, had they found? How small? How big? How important? Had Bartly really discovered something or was he just running scared, whistling his way through a graveyard like a frightened colored boy warding off haunts? If the latter, why had he asked Luther to tell Marcus he would drop in to see him at the bank? Just what—or whom—had Bartly found?

Among the early-arriving bank employees there were no groups standing about gossiping. Luther again made a mental note to be very sure, before he left to go to Dan Cornell's office on Friday, to get the envelope out of his safety deposit box.

Marcus came into his office at 9:20, spoke with Cass Worden for a few minutes, called some instructions to Miss Abelard. He turned to Miss Marshall and said, "I'll be over in Judge Howland's courtroom. If anyone wants me I'll be back when court recesses for lunch around noontime. And call the Randolph in Chancellor and reserve my suite from Friday through Monday or Tuesday."

"Yes, sir," Miss Marshall said without looking up and with no change in her solemn expression.

Luther went down the street to Reeve's Coffee Shop, but the talk there was much the same as that of yesterday. He picked up a morning paper that carried more photographs of the hole blasted in the parking lot and the unmarked car involved, but nothing fresher than the simple (and expected) statement from Sheriff Bartly: "We expect to apprehend the murderers within a reasonably short time."

Luther grinned secretly. Old Hogsnot. Old Windbag. He glanced at the bottom of the article. Hessie Loomis's funeral, the

boxed item read, would take place at noon on Thursday from Carroll's Funeral Home.

The Loomis funeral brought out an exceptional crowd. There was an honor guard of state police to bolster the deputies from the sheriff's office. The crowd at the Carroll Chapel flowed over into the street where the hearse stood, police cars and motorcycles in front and behind it, one black limousine and numerous private cars lined up behind the official vehicles. The service was short; there was no eulogy. A recording played religious hymns as a background for the prayers, and at 12:30 P.M. the pallbearers carried the casket out to be placed into the hearse. At 12:50 it had arrived at the cemetery. The graveside service was a very short one, concluding simply with "The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Several of the pallbearers bent over to pick up a handful of the red soil, and there was the clatter of small stones as each clod of dirt hit the casket. The people began to file out.

Still there were many who remained, as though reluctant to leave. They lounged in small groups watching the attendants as they shoveled the raw earth back from whence it had come, waiting until the grave had been covered over completely. Only then did an air of satisfaction seem to come over the watchers, and they walked to where their cars were parked on the road outside the wrought-iron fence. There was little conversation, as though these people had come only for the purpose of making sure HESSIE LOOMIS was properly and safely buried, that he would not be able to escape his justly deserved fate.

When Luther returned to the bank, Bartly was standing at Miss Marshall's desk. He heard her telling the sheriff that Mr. Radford had gone back to the Courthouse after lunch and should be returning at almost any minute. Her gloomy attitude seemed to say, "And why don't you go away somewhere and not disturb me?"

Luther said in passing, "Would you like to wait in my office, Sheriff? From there you can hear him when he comes in."

"Thanks, Luther," the sheriff said. "Don't mind if I do. Been standing on my feet too long today at the funeral. I seen you there."

"Sure. I figured it was only right that I should go."

Bartly followed Luther into his office, put his high-crowned hat on the desk, and cut a piece of leatherlike tobacco from the square

he took from his pocket, folded it into his mouth from the edge of the knife. Luther lit a cigarette for himself. "Drink, Sheriff?" he invited. "I can get it from Mr. Marcus's bar next door."

"No. No, thanks, son. What I got ahead of me needs a clear head. This—" he pointed to the wad in his jaw—"this'll do me for now."

Luther sat watching Bartly for a moment, then asked cautiously, "You got that lead you were telling me about yesterday?"

"What lead?" Bartly asked quietly, equally cautious.

Luther looked up at Bartly in assumed surprise. "Why, the lead you told me you had yesterday. Just before you got in your car and drove off with your deputy."

"Oh, that. Well—" The rotund sheriff looked around the office, then dropped his voice to a low whisper. "That's what I come to tell Mr. Marcus about. I got a real solid, definite thing to hang my hat on now."

Reality came back to Luther quickly, and with it the slow rise of cold fear in him. "You—you mean you really got the—the—man—?"

Bartly nodded confidentially. "Practic'ly. What we got, we got us a lead on a colored boy from over in the Swamp. He works in the still close by where it happened, and we got it from our man that this boy could tell us what we want to know. Who was out there that night. And I want them people who did it mighty bad. Mighty bad. Any one of 'em. Let me get my hands on just one of 'em an' I'll know who the rest of that passel of murderin' niggers are before any of 'em's twenty-four hours older. Yes, sir!"

"Shuhl!" Luther exclaimed with feigned admiration. "That's a fast piece of detective work as I ever heard of in all my life. How'd you get hold of your boy over there?"

It was more professional pride than wisdom that spoke now. "And that ain't all," Bartly added. "We even suspicion that at least one white man was workin' with them niggers. So if I can just lay my hands on only one of 'em, I can find out who he was. I'd rather have him than any two of the others."

"H-how many were there?"

"We think they were five, including the white man."

"A white man. A white man working with niggers to do another white man in?" Luther's voice took a rise with incredulity.

"Sho. Hell, we all know Hessie wasn't no angel. I know he went over to Buckeytown time after time, raidin' them nigger shacks, pullin' in any gal he taken a fancy to. So I guess somewheres along

the line he must of got mixed up with a white gal the same way. Could be her husband or father or a brother was workin' with them coons over in Buckeytown to trap Hessie."

Cold sweat began to stand out on Luther's body. He could feel a small trickle running down his chest. "How'd you ever figure out a thing like that?" he asked.

"It ain't so hard. In this business you live mostly off tips from people. More than fifty percent of the best detective work is tips. Revenge, to get a favor done for themselves, for money. One thing or another, the tips come in."

"You mean some colored boy talked about a thing like that against other colored boys? That's like signing his own death warrant, ain't it, Sheriff?"

Bartly nodded with a chuckle. "This time, it's like signin' his death warrant if he don't. Anyway that works out, it's his own doin' and I ain't about to start worryin' about *him*. All I want to do is to get my hands on one of 'em. Any one of 'em and I don't give a good goddamn which one. I'll strip the hide off that 'un till he tells me who the rest of them sonsabitches are, an' I'll do it inch by inch with the dullest pocketknife I can get my hands on!"

Luther shook his head. "I just can't credit a colored boy acting as tipoff man, not against his own people."

"Own people!" Bartly chortled. "Hell, he's only interested in his own black hide. I got a murder charge hangin' over his head an' he knows it. It ain't even a legal one, but he don't know that. We ain't never even found the body of the man he was supposed to've killed. But he don't know that. All he knows is I got him right where I want him. That's how come he passed the word on to our contact man. For this one piece of work, Shad Hubley's goin' a be a free man an' that's the on'iest thing he's got on his mind. To save that nigger black hide of his'n. An' it'll be worth it to bothen us!"

Luther shook his head in mock appreciation. "Mr. Marcus'll sure have to give you credit cleanin' up that case so fast."

The sheriff nodded complacently. "Good thing we got that Tullis boy workin' for us same as he's workin' for Johnny Norris. Hessie done set that up a long time ago. Before the war. And now that same man is goin' a get me Hessie's killers. In a way, it's like Hessie was catchin' his own killers right out'n his own grave, by God."

They heard Marcus come in, and the sheriff picked his hat up off Luther's desk and walked over to knock on the communicating door.

"Come in," they heard Marcus's voice.

As the sheriff went inside and closed the door behind him, Luther

was already reaching for his jacket on his way out. Once in his car, he headed quickly toward Buckeytown, bathed in perspiration, desperate in his need to get there quickly, yet cautious not to violate any traffic laws and be stopped even for a few minutes. Before he came to Buckeytown's first street, he turned off to the lower river road, parked his car, and walked hurriedly the short distance through the woods until he was opposite Robbie Tilebin's house. He surveyed the empty street cautiously, nervously, then crossed over and went along the side of the house to the back door, knocked on it sharply. His luck was holding out. Lida-Mae opened the door and stared at him in utter surprise, unable to speak. He pushed past her quickly into the kitchen, walked through it to the front room.

"I got to see Chester Deebin or Langley Bole right away, Lida-Mae. You know where either one of 'em lives?"

"Both of them live real close by of here. Is anything wrong, Mr Luther?"

He nodded, unwilling to waste words. "Real quick, Lida-Mae, you run down and bring either Chester or Langley back here with you. Don't alarm anybody else or tell them I'm here. Just get one of them back here in a hurry. Go on now. Every second is important to all of us."

She did not argue or ask any further questions. The look on Luther's face told her the seriousness of the need and she went quickly out of the house. An almost never-ending ten minutes passed before he heard footsteps on the porch. He looked out of the window and saw it was Langley Bole. Lida-Mae was with him.

"Hello, Langley," Luther greeted.

"Hello, Mist' Luther. What's wrong?" Anxiety was reflected on his wide, flat face as well as in his words.

"You know a boy name of Shad Hubley?"

"Sho. Sho now. He workin' at the Numbuh Three still."

"Could he of been anywhere near where we were when we took care of Loomis?"

Langley nodded his head solemnly. "Could a been. He works on one of my crews in the building only a short piece from where we was. You could see the building from there. He might a been loafin' out where we brought the deppity, heard what was goin' on, an' sneaked up to take a look. He workin' the unloading shift over on this side this week an' the next. What's he got to do with it, Mist' Luther?"

"Listen, Langley, real good and close. I hate to put the finger on any man, but I just came from a conversation with Sheriff Bartly.

You and Chester and Dubbie and Walter Pike, you all got to get this Shad boy out of here and do something to keep him from talking."

"Shad? Talkin' to who?"

"Langley, Shad's in some kind of trouble with the police, ain't he?"

"Sho now. He cut a man up a few months ago. Police say he kill 'im. He been under some kind a 'vestigation, he tellen us."

"If he's under suspicion of murder, how come he's not in jail?"

Bole shrugged. "I don' rightly know. Like I tole you, they 'vestigatin' him."

"All right, then, you tell me. Since when do the police let a colored boy out of jail without him putting up any bail money while they're investigating him for murder? *How come he's out of jail at all?*"

Bole scratched his head uncomprehendingly. "I sho don' know, Mist' Luther. He say— You know he's the one for *sure?*"

Luther nodded. "Your boy Shad Hubley is a police informer, Langley. A stool pigeon for Sheriff Bartly. That's how come he's home and working instead of being held in jail or out on a county road gang. He was there in the Swamp when we took care of Loomis. He talked to another stool pigeon, a white man who works for Johnny Norris. This white man promised Shad that if he could come up with the names of the men who took care of Loomis, just one of 'em, any one of 'em, he'd fix it with Bartly to let him off of that murder charge. Bartly's coming over here later on to pick up that white man and go see Shad. And here's a piece of news for you. That Shad, he's going to talk because if he don't, Bartly's going to take him apart, piece by piece, until he tells the names of the men he saw out there. You realize that the one he points his finger to could be you? Or Chester Deebin, Dubbie Hook, or Walter Pike? You want to be the one the sheriff picks up and takes to jail for Hesse Loomis's murder? Whoever it is, I can tell you this much, Langley. He'll be a hell of a lot better off dead because Bartly'll skin him alive, inch by inch, until he tells who was with him. And that includes me, too."

Bole stared at Luther, and they heard the soft moaning sound that escaped Lida-Mae's mouth from behind her hands. Langley said, "I sure hope you're sure about it, Mist' Luther."

"Sure? For Christ Almighty's sake, Langley! I got it from the sheriff's own mouth less than an hour ago!"

"When the sheriff he comin' over?" Bole asked.

"I don't know. He said 'later.' Could be most any time."

"All right, Mist' Luther," Bole said slowly. "You go on back an' don' worry your head none. If it got to be done, it got to be done. It'll all be took care of. I makes you my promise."

"All right, Langley, but get on it fast. He knows there was a white man with the rest of you. Shad told the other stool pigeon that much. If that boy talks, you know where I'm going to be. And all the rest of you. And just remember what could happen to your wives and families if you all get picked up for this."

Langley said, "You want us to take care of that white stool pigeon, too?"

"No. Just Shad. Right now he's the only one can talk enough to hurt us. He didn't tell—uh—the white man anything that Bartly can use, so he's no threat to us at the moment. If he gets to be one, I'll take care of him myself. Just Shad Hubley. If you don't get to him, I hope you know what can happen to every one of us."

"Sho. I know even better'n you, Mist' Luther. You go 'long now. I got work to do."

"Okay. You call me at this number when it's over."

6.

Nine-thirty P.M.

The phone rang in the study at Radford Hall. Newton, passing by the door, came in to answer it and saw Luther sitting in the reading chair, reaching for the receiver. He stepped back out of the room and closed the door again.

Luther said into the phone, "Hello."

"Mist' Luther?"

"Yes."

"I just wanted to tell you. Everything done fixed. Nobody's goin a say nothin' to nobody."

"You sure?"

"Couldn' be surer."

"That's fine. Thanks."

"Mist' Luther?"

"That's all. Don't talk any more. Somebody else here could be listening on another phone. Hang up."

"Sho. Good-by now."

7.

The bank, as usual on a Friday, with payroll lines longer than depositor lines, was busy from the moment the blinds were raised, the signal that Regis National was open for business. Marcus Rad-

ford was already in his office dictating letters and memoranda to Miss Marshall, clearing his desk before leaving for Chancellor after lunch. The communicating door between the two offices had been left open so that Marcus heard Luther when he came in just before ten and called to him. When Luther entered the office, Marcus said, "That will be all for now, Miss Marshall. I'll call you when I'm ready."

Luther sat in the chair and waited until Marcus had checked over the usual morning report that would bring him up to date with the bank figures of the day before. He pulled out the bottom drawer of his desk and put the report into a file, closed the drawer and turned to Luther.

"Your plans all made, Luther?" he asked pleasantly

"Yes, sir."

"And you're leaving tomorrow?"

"Sometime during the morning. Right after breakfast."

Marcus smiled. "You won't let anything change your mind or plans, will you?"

"No, sir," Luther said positively. "You can count on that, Mr. Marcus."

"I shall, Luther, I shall. All right, then. Everything else is in order. At three o'clock this afternoon Dan Cornell will be waiting in his office to see you. I'm sure you will find everything as we agreed."

Back in his own office, the temptation to call Ruth-Rachel was great, greater than ever before, but he restrained himself. Go by the timetable, he said. Everything gets snafu-ed when you don't go by the timetable. He sat at his desk and once again went over the details in his mind carefully, step by step, trying to anticipate alternate steps in case something unforeseen might happen to throw him off schedule.

He was even prepared for the eventuality that Marcus might, when he left town, take the precautionary step to lock his bedroom door, but he reasoned that this would not be likely. Marcus had no reason to believe anyone was even remotely aware of his hiding place, or to think that, with bank-vault protection at his disposal, anyone would suspect that he kept so much cash and valuable papers in his home. Yet Luther had picked up a long, flat bar with a sharp edge at the hardware store, one he could use to force entrance into Marcus's room from the outside gallery window if this became necessary.

Another thought nagged at him: Was Marcus going to Chancellor

to pay off some of his cohorts in the capital? And would he, therefore, be taking the cash from the mantel hiding place with him? Because he needed the reassurance, he put this thought aside as unreasonable, unwilling to believe that Marcus would put himself in the position of "delivery boy" when it was probably the established practice for those who were to be paid off to come to see Marcus at his home in Regis. Or more likely to the bank during business hours.

It was well past noon before he was finished with his little game of self-torment. At its conclusion he was still experiencing a feeling of well-being, that all was in final good order now that the Shad Hubley matter had been taken care of. The one detail that concerned him, but only minutely, was Ruth-Rachel. Should he see her tonight and tell her the whole story, ask her to be ready in the morning? He thought about it again and decided against it. If he told her now, something might happen to blow his carefully laid plan sky high. She might not be able to resist one last triumph, one final showdown with the one person she hated above all others in the whole world—Lutie Hagen.

No, he told himself again, stick to the timetable. In the morning, according to his original plan, he would phone her immediately after breakfast, just after he loaded the car. One stop at Carrie's, then—

He realized with a sense of quiet inner glee that the first step in his timetable had already taken place: Marcus had returned from lunch and left the bank to go to the station. Step Number Two would take place at three o'clock when he would walk into Dan Cornell's office. He looked at his wrist watch. One-fifteen. He would have lunch at the Regis Hotel dining room and that would take him up to two o'clock, at least. Then, one hour later—

Luther put on his jacket, buttoned the top button of his shirt, and pulled his tie tight. He put one hand on the doorknob and looked back over his office, smiling grimly. If he never walked back into this room, it would mean nothing to him. Absolutely nothing. In all the months he had occupied it, there was nothing of himself here. He had brought nothing into it, was taking nothing out of it, and, curiously enough, was leaving nothing behind except that which he had found here: furniture, pencils, a desk pen set, and several pads of paper.

So much for his empty life as "executive son-in-law" to Marcus A. Radford—as empty and meaningless as his life had been as Bethann Radford's husband.

On his way out Donna Martin looked up and smiled at him across the counter. He returned her greeting, remembered that another step on his timetable needed taking care of. He stopped, reached for a slip to authorize his entrance into the safety-deposit-box vault.

"You only put it away a few days ago," she said jokingly. "You taking it out to spend already?"

"No," he replied in the same light tone, "all I want to do is count it to make sure somebody else didn't spend it for me."

The letter, he noticed as he took it out of the metal box, was unstamped. He walked back to Miss Marshall's desk and placed the thick manila envelope on her mail-weighing scale, the address turned face down. She turned around from her typewriter and looked at him inquiringly. He pointed to the letter on the scale. "How much, first class?"

She looked at the dial that was hidden from him. "Where to?" she asked.

"Chancellor."

She leaned closer to the dial. "Twenty-four cents," she said.

Luther reached in his pocket and withdrew a quarter. "Give me the stamps, please."

She withdrew two tens and a four, searched through the stamp box for a penny and handed it all to him.

"Thanks," he said, smiling at her dour expression as she turned back to her typing task. He licked the stamps and affixed them to the envelope, put the envelope in his inside jacket pocket. He walked across the Square and into the Regis Hotel dining room, too late to retreat when he saw Bethann at a table with a man; and even with his back to Luther, he knew it would be Ross Markland. Couldn't wait one more day, could they, he thought to himself with a small, grim smile. Well, one more day and then— He came to a halt behind the waiter, as Bethann looked up and a smile broke over her face.

"Hello, Luther," she greeted, "have you had lunch?"

"Not yet. I—" Ross Markland was getting to his feet. Bethann said, "You remember Ross, don't you, Luther?"

Ross smiled and said, "Of course. How are you, Luther?"

Luther nodded without a smile. "Excuse me," he said, preparing to go on to the table where his waiter stood with waiting menu.

"Of course," Bethann replied and he walked on.

The chair the waiter had pulled out for him faced their table so that he would be looking at Bethann's back and directly at Ross Markland. They were chatting animatedly and Ross was smiling at

her as he talked. Suddenly a feeling of animosity swept over him for this man who was so easily able to sit and talk with Bethann as an equal, make her smile, activate her into animated conversation, knowing that he had never been able to, nor could ever achieve this with her. Just as quickly, the animosity was gone. After all, Bethann was the means of his present affluence, the prize he would pick up from Dan Cornell at three o'clock, the greater prize he would gain sometime tonight after the house was asleep. He would have this and more with Ruth-Rachel; and Ruth-Rachel, to his mind, was ten times the woman Bethann could ever be. A hundred times. It wasn't the fact, he realized, that he was angry with Ross Markland's success with Bethann so much as it was his own failure, his inability to command Bethann in the same way he could command Ruth-Rachel.

A light smile played over his lips. This Markland would make her a good husband, he could see. They had so much more in common to talk about, smile over, deliberately delaying the end of their meeting by calling for another pot of coffee to linger over. Well, that was fine. Much better this way than if they were really married and he was walking out on Bethann against her wishes; or if he were truly in love with her and she was giving him his discharge papers. How much better (and profitable!) it was this way.

The waiter brought his lunch and he turned his attention to it. Halfway through the meal, he saw Bethann and Ross get up and leave. Now he resumed his lunch more leisurely, going over his timetable again, pleasantly satisfied with every detail as it played itself out for him like a moving picture on a screen.

Lutie crossed his mind again. What a blow it would be to her when she realized that her daughter-in-law had flown, no longer dependent, a woman free and out of her range. Lutie, already half crazed, would go completely off her rocker, he told himself. Without someone around on whom she could dissipate her mental agonies, to use as a target for her Biblical invectives, she could turn only in one direction—complete alcoholism, eventual insanity. Well, there was little he could do about that. One thing for sure, by tomorrow they would be gone and what happened to Lutie would be in her own hands and the God she was always preaching about and praying to. From here on, he would have no more thoughts of Marcus or Bethann or Lutie Hagen. Carrie? Well, one day there would be a way to figure that out, but at the moment he would think of nothing beyond his immediate future with Ruth-Rachel and the abundant life they could have together with over \$200,000 to live on.

Plans, he thought. The best way in the world to kill time and

enjoy yourself. Make plans. Like reading travel folders. The dreaming could be almost as enjoyable as the actual trip; sometimes even more.

The waiter put the check down in front of him and he picked up the pencil and signed his name, chuckling inwardly at the thought that until he actually left Regis, everything he was buying or signing for would still be paid for by Marcus Radford—even the last tank of gas he would charge tomorrow morning just before they left town.

He went out into the Square and checked his watch against the Courthouse clock: 2:25 P.M. He walked leisurely across the Square, then over to Markland's, past other shop windows, doing no more than killing time. When the big clock struck three times, he went into the MacCallum Building, took the elevator to the third floor, and walked into Dan Cornell's office. The woman at the reception desk smiled at him, pushed a button at the base of the phone and spoke into the instrument, then rose and showed him into Dan's private office. Dan rose to his feet, smiled easily, brushed his unruly gray hair into place, and indicated the chair next to his desk.

"Hello, Luther," he greeted in a most cordial tone.

"Hello, Mr. Cornell. Mr. Marcus told me—"

"I know," Dan smiled. He moved a file folder before him, opened it, and Luther could see the green check lying on top of the thick envelope, some legal-looking documents beneath the envelope.

Dan said, "First, I'd like you to read this agreement, Luther. I want you to understand we have no doubt that you will go through with your promise. According to the agreement, you will take up residence in the state of Nevada, specifically Reno, and remain there for the required period of six weeks. Upon your arrival there, you will contact an old college friend of mine, Herb Schlosberg, who will commence the necessary proceedings. I've been in touch with Herb—yes, here is his address. When you have signed this document, I will hand you a note signed by you in favor of Marcus Radford in the amount of \$5000. Also, a cashier's check made out to you in the amount of \$25,000 and this envelope which contains a separate cashier's check for \$2500 and \$500 in cash to cover your living expenses and any possible emergencies that might arise. The legal fees and costs of the divorce will be taken care of by my office, so you needn't worry about that part of it."

Luther nodded, took the document, and scanned it lightly without caring too much what was in it. When he reached the bottom of the second page, he handed it back to Dan Cornell. Dan pushed it back to him, handed him a pen, and called the woman in from

the outer office to notarize the signature. This ritual finished, Cornell took another paper from the folder and handed it to Luther. "And the title to the Cadillac. It is yours now, Luther, registered in your name."

Luther took the check for the \$25,000 and folded it over twice, placed it in a compartment of his wallet. The note for \$5000 he put beside it, would give it to Carrie along with an envelope containing another \$5000. The envelope with the second check and cash he tucked into his inside jacket pocket beside the manila envelope he would mail to Harry Bledso. He started to rise and Cornell held him there for a moment.

"Luther, when you leave here, we have an idea that you won't be leaving alone, that you will have a young woman with you. To be more specific, the widow of your former Army buddy, Dale Hagen. Mr. Radford has no objection to this. As a matter of fact, it is because of this that he was more liberal than necessary in the amount of cash for your traveling and living expenses in Reno. And the car—" He smiled, seeing that Luther had taken no offense at his words. "I mention these things for only one reason. If you should suddenly decide to change your mind about going through with this divorce action—"

"I'm going through with it, don't you worry about that, Mr. Cornell," Luther interrupted with emphasis.

"—there are ways in which we can retaliate," Cornell continued, ignoring the interruption. "I don't think I need go into the details, but I can assure you that steps will be taken—"

Luther stood up and smiled. "Look, Mr. Cornell, you don't have to threaten me. Besides, you overlooked one thing in my favor."

"And what would that be, Luther?"

"Well, you already told me you know I won't be alone and you know who I'll be with. You think she'll let me change my mind about going through with this? You think I'd even *want* to?"

Cornell smiled. "You've got a good point there, Luther." He held out his hand. "Good luck. I'll see you when you get back."

Luther shook Cornell's hand and said to himself, *You wouldn't want to bet \$25,000 on that, would you, mister?*

8.

From Dan Cornell's office Luther walked to the parking lot behind the bank. Ben, the attendant, came out of the public telephone booth on the far side of the lot and began running toward Luther, reached him just as he was getting into the car.

"Mist' Luther! *Mist' Luther!*" he called imperatively.

Luther switched off the ignition key. "You want me, Ben?"

Ben came up closer, put his head in through the window, breathing hard. "Mist' Luther. I just got a message to give you."

Luther glanced around cautiously. "Who from?"

"Langley," Ben said in a low voice.

"Langley?"

"Langley Bole."

"What's he want with me?"

"He say he got to see you, Mist' Luther. Quick as you can. It— it somethin' important, he tole me. Somethin' *mighty* important. He didn't want to call you at the bank, but he knowed you'd show up sooner or later to get your car."

"Where is Langley?" Luther asked.

"He say for you to meet him the same place you all meet that last time. The fishin' cabin."

That would be Will Bartly's cabin, where they had laid the trap for HESSIE. Why not, he thought. Hell, nobody would suspect it as a rendezvous for the men who had committed the act.

"All right, Ben. I'll go there right away. You got a way of getting in touch with him?"

"He waitin' by the phone in the store in Buckeytown. I'll call him from the pay station here on the lot."

"All right, Ben. Tell him I'll meet him at the cabin in thirty minutes. I'm leaving right now."

Luther was there in twenty minutes. He parked the car in a secluded grove some distance from the cabin, took a circuitous route through the woods to reach it. From behind a tree he tossed a small stone at the back door, then another, watched from his hiding place as he saw the door open a tiny crack, then wider, finally to an opening large enough for Langley Bole to come through it and expose himself in the light for a moment. Luther came out from behind the tree and went to the back door, opened it, and went inside.

Langley stood nervously clutching at his own hands. "Mist' Luther, I think we in bad trouble," he said.

"What kind of trouble?"

"That white man you tole me about, that stool pigeon the sheriff got workin' for him. That—he wouldn't be Mist' Paul, would he? Mist' Paul Tullis?"

There was no use trying to hide it. Luther nodded his head affirmatively. "What about Tullis?"

"Well, Mist' Tullis, he come in with his men and a truck to haul away the goods comin' in from the Swamp. While the men, they

loadin' up the truck, Mist' Tullis, he come over to me an' taken me to one side . . ."

"Nice little party you boys had yourselves with the deputy the other night, wasn't it?" Tullis said.

"Wha—what you say, Mist' Tullis?"

"You heard me, Langley. Hessie Loomis. You boys had a lot of fun the other night, didn't you?" he repeated through a knowing grin.

"I—I don' know what you talkin' about, Mist' Tullis," Bole said nervously, feigning ignorance.

"Who you funnin', boy? I know what happened back there in the Swamp. Hell, you don' have to hide nothin' from me. We're on the same team. Anybody knows I never had no use for that skunk Loomis nohow."

Bole stood in silent doubt, looking toward the truck where the men were loading the cases. A few moments passed. He tried to take advantage of the momentary silence by making a move to return to his job of supervising the loading, but Paul Tullis stopped him with a pertinent question. "Langley, where's Shad Hubley? I thought he was supposed to be workin' in your crew all this week."

Now there was little doubt in Langley Bole's mind that Tullis was the man Luther had referred to, the white stool pigeon who was working with the sheriff's office. "I don' rightly know, Mist' Tullis," he replied in an assumed offhand manner. "Shad, he was workin' at the Numba Three still, last I knowed."

"Can it, Langley. Who you kidding, boy? That was last week. He's supposed to be working for you on this loading crew this week and all next week and you know it. The other boys told me."

"How come you so intrusted in Shad, Mist' Tullis?" Bole stalled.

"Well, Shad's a good boy. One a the best workers you got. I don't see him around, so I just thought I'd ask. Nothin' wrong in that, is there? Unless you got somethin' to hide, maybe."

Bole laughed nervously. "I got nothin' to hide. Shad, he just didn' show up for work today, so I put another man on to take his place."

"He sick or somethin'? You check to see if he was sick?"

"No. He miss a day now an' then, jus' like the rest of 'em, so I guess this another one a them times. He'll show up tomorrow, maybe."

"Sure. Sure, I guess he will." Tullis grinned malevolently. Suddenly he reached out and gripped one of Langley's overall straps.

"Listen, boy. I got a good idea what happened to Shad. I been lookin' all over Buckeytown for him and he ain't nowheres around. I got a feelin' the same thing happened to him that happened to Loomis, except maybe for the hand grenades. Also, I got an idea you was one of the five men took care of Hessie."

Langley tried to back away from Tullis's tight grip. "Tha's crazy talk, Mist' Tullis," he protested angrily. "You go 'roun' sayin' things like that, you goin' a have a lynchin' mob comin' over here. Please don't go sayin' nothin' like that, Mist' Tullis. That ain't goin' a get nobody nothin' but trouble an' killin'."

"Sure it will, Langley. Trouble and killin' is just exactly what it's goin' a bring to a lot a people." He loosened his grip on the overall strap. "I'll make a deal with you. I know there was one white man with you boys over there in the Swamp workin' together. Don't lie to me. Shad was workin' outside the loadin' warehouse out there and he saw a white man. He said he saw the niggers, too, but it was too dark to make them out; that is, unless the sheriff would cancel the murder charge he had against him. If he did that, then maybe Shad's eyesight would improve. That's where he left it when he disappeared, and I got a good hunch you had your hand in it somewheres. All right, Langley, you just tell me who that white man was and I'll forget all about the others. I won't breathe a word to anybody about you bein' one a the men was over there. Just the name a that white man is all I want."

Bole took a deep breath. "I don' know what you talkin' about, Mist' Tullis," he protested again. "Lissen. I got me a wife an' a fam'ly an' I can't get mixed up in nothin' like this. I don' know nothin' about no white men except the ones I work with on the job. Like you. Shad, he crazy to say a thing like that about anybody anyways. How could he see so good with only the quarter moon to go by?"

"How you know how dark it was by the quarter moon if you wasn't one a the men out there?" Tullis grasped at Bole's last statement.

"I—I—well, it was night when it happen, wasn't it? If it was night an' he wasn' right on top a what was happenin', how could he tell one man from another? How come he could tell was a man white or was he colored in the dark?"

"He saw by moonlight and a flashlight one of 'em was holding. Just the same way you and your boys saw to beat the livin' hell out a Loomis before you took him into town and blew him to pieces.

You better listen to me, Langley: you only got till tonight to make up your mind to tell me who that man was, so you better decide to tell me. If you don't talk by the time that truck is unloaded when I get back, I'm goin' in to see Sheriff Bartly and tell him what I know. You know what's goin' a happen then, don't you? You'll be the only one I can name, so you're goin' a get the worst of it until Old Hogsnout breaks you down and you'll be spillin' every name was out there with you, white, black, green, or purple. You think about it now, Langley. One name and the rest a you boys won't be bothered."

One of the men loading the truck called back to Tullis. Paul grinned and said, "All right, boy. I got to take this load out, but I'll be back tonight. When I drop the men off here, you be ready with your crew to unload the sugar I'll be bringin' back. And if you ain't come up with Shad Hubley in person by that time, you better be ready to do some talkin' yourself because that'll be your last chance. And don't try to pull any funny business on me like you did on Loomis. I'll be ready for you and it'll only go worse for you."

10.

"—and tha's the way he put it to me, Mist' Luther," Langley said finally. "I don' know what Shad tole him, but he sure suspects me an' he knows they was a white man there; an' he wants that white man's name mighty bad."

So this was the first flaw in his timetable, Luther thought. Tullis! I had to go and kill a good man like Dale Hagen and a no-good bastard like Tullis came through the whole thing without a scratch on him. Let me think. Let me think. Let me think.

To Langley Bole he said, "Exactly where does the truck unload that sugar when it comes back off the trip?"

Langley said, "It come in off the Twelfth Street cutoff, then down the dirt road to the river so's nobody can see it when it load up or drop off the men. It got to make a little turn an' back in so's it can pull out with the front a the truck facin' out to the road. He got to back into the same place on account of he's goin' a have that load a sugar for us to take off."

"Plenty of woods around there?"

"Plenty an' thick, right on down to the river bank. Tha's why they pick the place, so nobody can see it from the road or the houses."

"Tell me about it again. The truck comes down the Twelfth Street cutoff, then it turns off on this dirt road that goes all the way down

to the river where the pirogues and flatboats bring the 'shine out of the Swamp. Right?"

"Tha's right, Mist' Luther."

"Then it stops, turns, and backs down the rest of the way so that when it's time to pull out, the front of the truck is facing toward the road. Is that it so far?"

Langley nodded. "Tha's right."

"All right. They'll have a load of sugar to take off. How long will that take?"

"It won't take no more'n maybe half hour, forty minutes."

"And you'll be there."

"Shuh. I got to count the sacks an' see the men put it in the little storehouse we got fixed up for it till the flatboats come to take it over to the Swamp fir's thing tomorrow mornin'."

"What does Tullis do while the truck is being unloaded?"

"Oh, he sit in the cab and smoke. Sometime, if it take too long, he get down an' stretch his legs, holler for the men to hurry up."

"And what time you think he'll be back with the sugar tonight?"

"He tell me he be back by eight-thirty, for me to have the crew ready then."

"All right, Langley. Now you listen to me carefully."

11.

The truck came rumbling down the dirt road, its canvas sides rattling and shuddering as its wheels hit into the old, dry ruts. It came slowly. Paul Tullis had cut off his lights, allowing the truck to follow the deep ruts, caroming lightly from side to side. In a little while the front wheels practically guided themselves toward the right and Tullis braked to a stop. He put the truck in reverse and called back into the truck to the men sitting on top of the sugar sacks, "All right, back there. Keep an eye out for me."

One of the men voice-guided him until he had backed up to where the unloading crew waited. Tullis set the hand brake, shut off the motor, and got down from the cab. "All right," he called as his own men jumped down from the truck to join the waiting gang, "let's get this thing unloaded. We ain't got all night. Let's get goin'."

He pulled a cigarette out of his shirt pocket, lit it, and took a deep puff before he moved toward the back of the truck. Already the tailgate had been lowered and six men stood on the ground waiting for the two who remained aboard after unfastening the tailgate chain. The men in the truck began to bring the sugar sacks to the edge of the tailgate, lifted them to the shoulders of the wait-

ing line of men, to be carried some thirty yards to a small, tarpaper-covered wooden shack hidden among the trees. The carriers circled back and stood in line waiting to receive the hundred-pound sacks in turn.

Tullis came back to see that the operation had begun properly and was moving steadily under the watchful eye of the crew boss, Langley Bole. He stood beside the Negro for a few moments, pulling on his cigarette, then motioned Bole to the front end of the truck, out of hearing of the others. "You make up your mind yet?" he asked. "You only got till the truck is unloaded. You don't talk, I'm goin' right into town to have a little talk of my own with the sheriff."

Langley nodded dolefully in assent.

Tullis's eyes lighted up with a sharp glint. "Who was he?" he demanded in a low voice.

Langley said, "How I know you goin' a do like you said, Mist Tullis? How I know you ain't goin' a turn me in with him, then beat the rest a them names out a the two of us?"

Tullis grinned. "Listen, Langley, I gave you my word, didn't I? Another thing—you tell me who he is and I'll see you get a piece of the reward money. You can make yourself a good \$200 at the same time. Now you tell me who that white man was."

Bole looked around him cautiously. He motioned Paul Tullis farther in the direction away from the unloading party. For a moment they stood at the head of the truck while Langley seemed to be making his mind up to reveal the name of the white culprit. He put a hand up to his mouth and Tullis leaned closer to hear him.

"Luther Dorman," Langley whispered hoarsely into Tullis's ear.

"*Luther Dorman?*" Tullis repeated in shocked surprise.

"That him, Luther Dorman. He set the whole thing up," Langley repeated.

Sure, Tullis thought with almost uncontrollable elation, why the hell not? He was the one was so damn close to that nigger who got his leg shot off, that Robbie somethin'-or-other. Sure. He wasn't no more'n a nigger-lover an' never been nothin' else.

A long, deep sigh escaped from Tullis's mouth. "All right, Langley. Now you listen to me. You got nothin' to worry about, like I promised you. Not you or the others with you. When this thing is over and I get me the reward money, you'll get your \$200." He stopped talking and grinned broadly with satisfaction. "What the hell," he said under his breath, "who would a thought the hero would be mixed up in this here thing?"

At the very moment when Langley Bole stood at the head of the truck whispering Luther Dorman's name into Tullis's ear, Luther had come into the loading line with the other men, taking his place between two of the unloading crew who had already been briefed by Langley long before the truck had arrived. Luther's face and hands had been blackened and he was dressed as the others, in denim overalls and an old khaki shirt, a floppy-brimmed felt hat and heavy work shoes. In the dark no one would have mistaken him for anything other than what he seemed to be, one of the Negro crewmen.

On signal, he came out from behind the storage shack and took his place in the line, and as he came around to take his turn, the men standing on the edge of the truck did not place a sack of sugar on his shoulders. Instead, they bent over quickly and hoisted him by his arms into the truck. He went to a cleared corner in the back and lay down while the men placed a piece of loose canvas tarpaulin over him. He lay quietly until the last sack had been unloaded, the tailgate chained up into place, and he heard Bole call out, "Okay, Mist' Tullis. She ready to go."

He heard the motor turn over, the gears mesh easily into first, and the truck rumble back up the rutted slope. It waited at the Twelfth Street intersection to make sure no other traffic was in sight, and now Tullis switched on the headlights and made the left turn toward County Road. The Negroes had all remained behind. There was nothing left now for Tullis but to garage the truck, get his own car, and go have his little chat with Bartly and arrange for the reward money to be paid to himself after the men were brought in.

Tullis thought gleefully, what a thing to come across! Luther Dorman, Marcus Radford's son-in-law, the goddamned biggety hero, that uppity bitch Bethann Radford's husband, letting himself get involved in the murder of a white man with these Buckeytown niggers. And Hessie Loomis at that! Wait'll Old Hogsnout got a load of that, by God! He'd bring Luther and Langley Bole in and Bartly would be giving odds to his deputies on how quickly he would find out who the rest of the niggers were. And Tullis would be sitting pretty with the \$1000 reward money in his pocket. He'd make a deal with Bartly to keep him out of it. Bartly would work it somehow. Hell, he wanted too much to get his hands on that gang not to be willing to play ball. One thousand dollars and to hell with Master Sergeant Luther Dorman, the phony hero.

The garage was an unused barn on the back edge of the old Henderson place, a worn-out piece of land that Old Man Henderson

no longer felt was worth the effort to cultivate, particularly when he could get an easy yearly rental for it from Johnny Norris. Two more miles and Tullis wheeled north off County Road. The night was overcast, moonless, and he switched the headlights from low to high beam as he approached the gate. He stopped and got down to open it, got back into the cab and drove through to the big barn. He pulled the truck around to back it inside. There were two trucks parked there already that were exactly like this one, with room for several more. At the far end of the barn was Paul's old Chevy. He switched off the lights and ignition and got down from the cab, stretched to relieve the stiffness of the long day behind the wheel. He took a cigarette out of the pocket of his leather flight jacket, held the long stick match up as he lighted it, and walked back toward the Chevy, his free hand searching in his pocket for his car keys. As he passed the back of the truck, the strong beam of a flashlight hurtled suddenly toward him and he swung around startled, trapped in its light, his mouth open wide with surprise and fright, the cigarette and lighted match dropping to the floor.

"You better stomp that cigarette out, Paul," Luther said quietly.

Tullis put one foot out and rubbed the red tip out, his actions completely automatic in obedience to the command, moving slowly as though in a dream. "Who—is—it?" he asked. "What're you—doin' here?"

"Take a look, Paul," Luther said again. The beam of light left Tullis for only a split second, hit the nine-millimeter automatic in Luther's hand, then shot back to Tullis. "Don't make any dumb moves or you'll get it before you ever find out why."

"Is—is that—you—?"

"It's no secret any more, Paul. It's me. Luther Dorman. The white man who was with Langley Bole and the others the night we took care of Hessie Loomis."

"Luther, listen—" Tullis began.

"No, Paul. You listen. Up to now you been doing all the talking to Langley. *'Give me the name of the white man was with you and the rest of you don't have nothing to worry about.'* You recognize that, Paul?" Luther laughed mirthlessly. "Boy, you sure must think a man with a brown or black skin, he's got a special kind of brown or black brain. You didn't think Langley was stupid enough to believe that if he told you the white man was me, you wouldn't have Bartly pull him in, too, so they could whip the names of the other boys out of us, did you? Sometimes, when I think of the kind of

men was in the Army, I wonder how we ever won the war as soon as we did."

"Luther," Paul choked out, "what you goin' a do? Listen, Luther, I swear, honest to God, Luther, I'll swear on a Bible—"

"What you going to swear to, Paul? That you won't tell Bartly it was me and Langley who was out there with the rest of them? That if I let you squeeze out past me, I can trust you, for Chrissakes? You no-good son-of-a-bitch, don't you think I know now that 'way back, before the war even, you were the stool pigeon who was tipping off HESSIE Loomis every time Dale or Johnny tried to run an extra load through? How much was he paying you then, Paul? And now you got something worth \$1000 in cash reward money sitting in your lap, you think I got no idea how fast you'd turn us in the minute you're loose?"

Tullis stood bracing himself with his feet a good eighteen inches apart, his knees buckled slightly as though he were leaning forward into the strong, bright beam of the flashlight that seemed to be holding him up. He was sweating heavily now, panic in his eyes, fear written across his unshaven face. Sweat trickled down from his forehead, and Luther could see the collar of his shirt, sticking up out of the leather flight jacket, had turned black with it. "Luther," he pleaded, "you can do it any way you want, only let me go. I'll sign a paper sayin' anything you want me to say. That I'm a liar, anything. Get all the witnesses you want. I'll even say that I was one of them out there with you, so that if I talk, I'll be in it as deep as the rest. Luther, for Christ's sake, *please!* I'm *begging* you! *Please*, Luther!"

Luther stared coldly at Tullis, said in clipped, brittle words, "I can't let you go, Paul. You're a live bomb, loaded with enough to send five men, me one of them, to the gas chamber, unless Bartly and his boys get it in their heads to stretch a few ropes first. I can't trust you. You were HESSIE's stool pigeon and now you're Bartly's. The only conscience you got is a dollar and there's a thousand of 'em riding on me and those guys who had every right to do what they did to that no-good bastard, Loomis."

The abject look on Tullis's face was more expressive than any words he could speak, any words he could utter in his defense. It was all there at once, the fear, the realization of impending death, the terror, the plea, the sure knowledge that within a matter of minutes he would be lying here on the floor with a bullet through him. Dead. He would be dead at thirty. His life would be over before he had even had a chance to really live and enjoy it.

"Luther!" The single word rang out, ending with a long, sobbing gasp of the agony within him.

Luther hesitated. The pitiful cry shot through him, searing him. He knew he must do what he must do. There was too much at stake for him to vacillate. What am I waiting for, he asked himself. If I could kill a man like Dale Hagen by accident, why the hell am I hesitating to kill a chinch bug like Paul Tullis on purpose? What he was about to do to me and those others was a lot worse than what I'm going to do to him. At least he won't get the physical pain and torture we'd get.

The flashlight in his left hand trembled as the index finger of his right hand tightened its grip on the trigger of the automatic. He knew exactly when the shot would go off, knew it by the feel on the trigger. Now! he said to himself, giving it the final squeeze. The weapon twitched in his hand and he saw the spurt of flame, heard the ring of the cartridge casing as it hit the floor. Tullis was still on his feet, one hand reaching for the area just over his stomach, the other extended as though he were balancing himself; and once more Luther heard the word, a low, gasping sob, *"Luther!"*

"I can't help it, Paul," Luther said with genuine regret in his voice. "You loaded this bomb yourself and pulled the pin and it's got to go off, except that instead of five of us holding it, you're holding it all by yourself." He pulled the trigger again.

Tullis's mouth opened but the words were never spoken. He felt the blow and it was as though a hard fist had hit him, shaken him roughly. Still there was no pain with the blow. It staggered him and he almost fell to his knees, but he managed to steady himself on his feet. One hand began to reach up toward the dark red stain that appeared and was beginning to spread out to each side and downward. The second bullet had struck him about four inches higher than the first and to the right. Tullis pitched forward on the floor of the barn.

Luther went to the shapeless mass and felt for a pulse beat. There was none. He threw the beam of the flashlight in a circle around him and saw the glint of metal on the floor—Tullis's car keys. He went to the Chevy and started it up, got in, and drove out without another glance at the inert remains of Paul Tullis.

On the way back to Buckeytown he tried to think of tomorrow in order to wipe out the tonight that brought back memories he wanted desperately to forget. He was still sweating over this last experience, and tears of self-pity came burning into his eyes and

spilled over as he acquitted himself of this act, told himself he hadn't wanted to do this thing, that he had been compelled to do it because of the others involved, because Tullis had forced it upon him. Another thought came back into his mind and he couldn't remember when or where he had heard it: *A man kills a hundred men in a war and becomes a hero; another drops bombs upon cities and kills thousands of men and women and children and he, too, becomes a hero; but once the war is over and he kills one man, just one, he becomes a hunted man, a murderer with a price on his head and a penalty he must pay.*

He came back into Buckeytown by the Twelfth Street cutoff, turned down the dirt road and headed for the river. When he turned the lights off, Langley Bole came out of the darkness alone and stood silently beside the car.

"I'm sho glad you come back, Mist' Luther," he said, the relief apparent in his voice.

"All right, Langley," Luther said. "It's over. I think this is the last of it. Shad knew and he's gone. Tullis knew and he's gone, too. Can you get rid of this car for me while I get mine and go home?"

"Sho, Mist' Luther. We take care a that. Nobody's ever goin' a find it. We'll run it—"

Wearily, Luther held up a hand. "Don't even tell me what you're going to do with it, Langley. I don't want to hear any more about it."

He got out of the car and handed over the keys. Bole started to get into the car. Luther reached into his hip pocket and took out the automatic Langley had given him earlier. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped it carefully, then put it in the glove compartment of the car. "When you get rid of the car, make sure that goes with it. Don't keep it, Langley, because if you do and you're ever caught with it, it will tie you up with Tullis's murder and nobody on earth will be able to get you out of that."

"I won't even touch it, Mist' Luther," Langley said. "Before you go, you better clean that muck off your face and hands. Your clo'es are in the shack where the sugar is stored. There's a basin of water an' some soap, too. I lef' it open for you."

"Thanks, Langley. You take care now and tell the others the same thing. And good-by. You see Robbie when he gets back, don't go to explaining too much about Loomis and Tullis. Just count your blessings and forget it."

"Good-by, Mist' Luther," Langley Bole said. "And good luck. I wish you everything good."

It was nearing ten-thirty as he drove along County Road toward the Hall. He was too tired to even think of stopping by to see Ruth-Rachel.

Let it go, he thought. Tomorrow will be soon enough.

Chapter 17

The Hall was quiet and, with the exception of the light over the door of the front veranda and the smaller one over the back entrance, was otherwise dark. Luther got out of the car with icaden feet. It was almost eleven o'clock by his watch when he entered and went up the stairs. Bethann's car was the only one unaccounted for. He would have to wait for her to come in and go to sleep before he could get to work. The rest, while he waited, would be good for him and besides, he could not risk any mischance, however remote or improbable. Who knows, he thought. She might knock on my door to ask me something she'd forgotten, and I wouldn't be there. She'd know I was home because my car is in the garage. Then what? She might call Newton or go prowling around and find me in Mr. Marcus's room.

Hell, he thought, I'm too tired now anyway; beat. It'll be easier somewhere around three or four in the morning.

He set the alarm of the electric clock for three o'clock, turned the lever to "soft alarm," then took off his jacket, shoes, and tie and lay down on the bed. Most of his clothes were already packed. In the morning, he could take care of the rest of it in a matter of minutes. The packed luggage was standing in the corner near the door. One open bag lay on a chair waiting to receive the last few items of his belongings. And the money.

He remembered the sudden happy gleam in Newton's eyes when he had asked him earlier to bring up the canvas flight bag and the two pieces of leather luggage Bledso had helped him pick up in Washington before the bond tour started. Thinking of Bledso brought Harris to his mind and he smiled now, wondering if either one of them was as near the \$200,000 mark in his life as he was. Satisfied in his mind that neither would be for a long time to come, he put out his cigarette, turned off the lamp, and let sleep overtake his weariness.

He awakened with a start, sat up, and flicked on his cigarette lighter, noted the time: 2:20. What had wakened him, he wondered. He lit a cigarette, got up, and went to the window and looked out, relief sweeping over him. In the yellow light cast by the small bulb over the rear door entrance he could make out Bethann's car. Whether it had been sitting there for a minute or an hour, he couldn't tell or even estimate, but it was enough to know that she was home. At this hour she should be sound asleep after her night out—probably with Ross Markland. He wondered for that split second if she and Ross were as deeply involved in an affair as he was with Ruth-Rachel; and then he thought churlishly, why the hell not? She had his good friend, Harwick, first, then me, then who-the-hell-knows? More power to both of them. I've got mine. I'm satisfied.

He went to the door and listened for some movement, but the house was completely still. He went back to his bed to give her more time, if necessary, to fall into an even deeper sleep, trying to imagine her as she lay in her bed, perhaps squirming around restlessly the way he always did, to find the most comfortable spot. He tired of the game and smoked another cigarette. Paul Tullis came back to his mind and he tried to shut him out, wondering if now he would have to live with two dead faces instead of the one. The lamp was out and the room in total darkness except for the lighter shade of the windows, but this was behind him and he could not see it. He realized then that he was not enjoying his cigarette in the complete darkness that surrounded him and wondered if this was because he could not see the smoke. He then experimented by blowing the smoke over the red tip of the cigarette and, seeing the smoke as it fanned the burning tobacco into a glowing cherry-red brightness, convinced himself that this was so: that in order to really enjoy smoking, one must see the smoke. And then he fell to wondering if blind men ever smoked and this stopped him because he knew no blind men.

The radium dial of the electric clock showed eight minutes to three. He reached over and pushed the alarm button in so that it would not ring at three. I'll give it another five or ten minutes on my own, he said to himself.

He lay back thinking again about his timetable; so far, the first steps had worked out fine. Marcus had left town and Dan Cornell had turned over everything to him as it had been agreed upon. Only the incidents related to Shad Hubley, Langley Bole, Paul Tullis and himself, matters he could not possibly have foreseen,

had entered into the scheme of things inadvertently. *Luck*, he thought. Lady Luck is still riding with me. Look how it fit in so that nothing else on the timetable was disturbed. A thing like that might have ordinarily needed days, even weeks, to be taken care of, and now it had been reduced to a mere matter of a few hours. Let the next step, in Marcus's room, and the one after that, meeting Ruth-Rachel, work out. That was all he wanted. If nothing else worked out, he would still be well ahead and grateful for the rest of his life.

When next he looked at the clock, the radium-coated hands showed twenty minutes past three. He stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray and got off the bed, went to the closet and got out the pair of rope-soled shoes and slipped them on. He took off the white shirt and slipped into a dark gray sports slirt. He took his flashlight from the open suitcase, tested it by throwing a beam into a corner of the closet, then shut it off. He knew there should be a flashlight in the hiding place, but he might need this to guide him to the mantel without stumbling over a piece of furniture he could not see in the dark.

He went to the door and opened it easily, slowly, peered out through the small crack into the hallway. The small, dim night light on the opposite side of the hall next to Harriet's room gave off a yellow glow, marking little more than its location. Softly, he stepped out into the hall, rope-soled feet on the thick carpet soundless as he moved wraithlike toward Marcus's room. Now, he wondered, with some slight misgiving, would he find it locked? Would he have to go back and get the flat instrument he had bought and effect an entrance from the gallery window? He disliked this idea, since it would force him to break the lock, which would likely be discovered before Marcus returned from Chancellor and start some kind of an investigation. He put his hand on the knob and turned it easily, fully to the left. He pushed gently inward and felt the door move. He stepped inside quickly and closed the door, a slow sigh of relief escaping him.

He threw the flashlight's beam around the room, careful to lower its ray before it reached a window, bringing it back to rest on the fireplace. Everything seemed in order. He crossed the room and placed the flashlight on the floor, its beam shooting into the fireplace opening against the cypress and oak logs. Now he moved his hand along the mantel easily, knowingly; his hand touched the first vase and he lifted it, placed it on the floor; next came the silver-framed photographs, and these, too, he placed in their same posi-

tions on the floor. Now the second vase on the right side. The mantel was cleared.

Luther took the small, flat key from his watch pocket, picked up the flashlight, and guided the key into the lock hidden under the lip of the mantel. The key went in easily and he felt the locking bar move smoothly as he turned it. He removed the key and replaced it in his pocket. Now he lifted the mantel ledge to its full, upright position and swung the supporting bar upward from the inside to hold it in place.

Before he moved the flashlight toward the right side of the opening, two words, like a silent admonishment—or prayer—crossed his mind: *Be there!* Slowly, as if to torture himself with the doubt, he moved the beam over the dark cavern.

The money was there. It was stacked in exactly the same precise way he had seen it last, and now he doubted that Marcus had even looked in here since that last time. If he had, certainly he was unaware that the 1940 file had been removed. Breathless excitement rose high in him, almost feverishly. He ran the light over the stacks again, seeing the denomination figures in the corners, the twenties, fifties, and hundreds. He ran his free right hand across the top layers, caressing each stack with the gentle touch of a lover. *All mine*, he thought with a warm glow. *All mine! A hundred and ninety-five thousand dollars and it's all mine!*

It was then he remembered that he had brought nothing with which to transport these thirty-five packets back to his room. He decided to make do as best he could. He opened several buttons of his gray shirt and began stuffing the packets inside it, feeling the rich, soft paper against his skin, pushing them around toward the back to make room. He put two of the packets into each of his four trousers pockets, shoved the balance into his shirt until he was shapeless and grotesque. He grinned, thinking, this is really what you call being stuffed with money. The last packet accounted for, he flicked through the files and decided on the years 1943 and 1945. He removed these and put them on the floor for the moment.

Burdened as he was now, the job of bending over to pick up the vases and photographs was more cumbersome. He took his time and replaced each of the items carefully in its original position, then once again inserted the key into the lock and turned it, felt the locking bar move back into place.

So far, so good; and in a few moments this most important phase of the timetable would be over, leaving only one more to come. No, he thought, two. The next would be to pick up Ruth-Rachel

and the last would be to drop the manila envelope into a mailbox before they left Regis.

He snapped off the flashlight beam and again took great care in opening the door, peered out and along the hallway, then stepped out cautiously and made his way silently to his room. Inside, he brought the flashlight into play again, found the open suitcase he had planned to store the money in. He moved it from the chair to the bed and began to remove the money from his shirt and trousers pockets and pack them into the bag. When he had finished, he remembered that he wanted to keep some out for Carrie. He took out a packet of one hundred fifties—\$5000—and put this in the hip pocket of his trousers. Now he slipped the 1943 and 1945 folders, his “added insurance,” between some shirts, took off the gray shirt he was wearing and covered the money with it, then snapped the bag shut and locked it, buckled the two straps closed. He hefted it, smiled with complete satisfaction. Now all he had to do was reset the alarm for seven-thirty and move the lever up to “loud alarm.” He would get up, dress, toss the rest of his clothes into the canvas flight bag, and be off.

Anticlimactic weariness returned to him now as he undressed down to his shorts, too tired to bother with pajamas. He got into bed, pulled the covers up, lit one final cigarette, stubbed it in the ashtray after only three or four puffs, and fell fast asleep at once.

2.

In the morning Luther awoke when the first sound of the alarm nudged him. He went through every motion exactly as he had planned it, then picked up the one piece of luggage with the money in it and carried it downstairs. He went out to the car—his car now; he smiled at the thought of actually owning the Cadillac—and locked the bag inside the trunk, then went back into the house. He passed the dining room and saw that Bethann was there having a cup of coffee, and he knew that her early rising on a Saturday morning, *this* Saturday morning in particular, must be for his benefit. She looked up and greeted him with a smiling, friendly, “Good morning, Luther,” and it made him happy that now the coldness, the disdain—or whatever it was she had felt for him before this morning—was no longer there.

“Good morning,” he responded with a smile. “You mind if I sit down and have some coffee before I leave?”

“Of course not, Luther,” she replied. He sat down and she continued, “In fact, I was about to send Newton up to ask you to come

down to breakfast with me. I didn't want you to leave without saying 'good-by.'"

Luther smiled broadly, easily. "Or to make sure I was really leaving?" he asked.

"No." She laughed. "As a matter of fact, Ross and I had dinner with the Cornells last night and Dan told us all about the final arrangements. It's only that I want you to know that I don't feel anything—harsh—about you, Luther. Now that this matter is settled between us, there's no reason why, when you come back from the West, we won't be able to say 'hello' to each other when we meet in town, is there?"

Luther chuckled inwardly. There won't, he thought, except that it'll be a long way from here when you and I pass each other on any street again. Aloud, he said, "No, I guess not, Miss Bethann." He laughed and added, "I guess it's all right to call you *Miss* Bethann again, now that we won't be married any more, isn't it?"

Sudie brought the silver coffeepot in and poured some into his cup without being told to, and he took this as a small token of peace between himself and the old Negress, now that she knew he would be gone from the Hall within a matter of minutes. She padded out of the room and closed the door to the butler's pantry.

"I guess you and Ross Markland will be getting married soon, won't you?" Luther said.

"As soon as we get the word that the decree has been granted." She looked up at him suddenly, concern reflected on her face. "Luther—" she began.

Luther said at once, "I hope you don't mean to ask me whether or not I'm going through with the divorce, Miss Bethann. I been asked that twice already, once by Mr. Marcus and again by Mr. Cornell. If that's it, I can tell you, I'm going through with it, just like I told Mr. Marcus and Mr. Cornell I would. When I leave here in a little while, I'm heading directly west and north for Reno, and six weeks after I get there you and Ross Markland can say your vows to each other."

The concern left her face and the smile returned to replace it. "Thank you, Luther. I hope it hasn't been too bad for you, all of this. It's too late to say that it shouldn't have happened in the first place, so instead, I'll just say good-by and wish you all the happiness in the world for your future with—with—"

She hesitated, sorry she had not stopped sooner. "That's all right, Miss Bethann. I know you know about me and Ruth-Rachel. Along about the time you get the word about the divorce, we'll already

be married. No," he added, "I can't say it's been too bad. I'm just sorry you had to put up with—"

"Luther, let's not say any more about it, shall we?" Bethann stood up and offered her hand. Luther stood, took it, and pressed it gently. "Good-by, Luther," she said.

"Good-by, Miss Bethann," he replied. She turned to leave the room and he said to her back, "You don't mind if I make a call from here before I leave, do you?"

She turned and said, "Of course not. Use the phone in the study if you want to."

Luther sat down at the table again as Bethann left the room, poured another cup of coffee, and drank it slowly. When he finished, he would call Ruth-Rachel and break the news to her. It wouldn't take her any time at all to pack and get ready to leave with him. He would have plenty of time to stop by and see Carrie. On a Saturday morning Fred would probably be on his way into town early to open the store, so he would miss him, but that wouldn't be too serious.

Luther drank the coffee and went out into the hallway, heading for the privacy of Marcus's study. As he passed the stairs, he looked up and saw Newton carrying the canvas flight bag and the other leather suitcase down the steps. Luther grunted with surprise at the sight of the old Negro doing something that Luther wouldn't have thought of asking him to do; then smiled as he recalled that this speeding him on his way was probably the most enjoyable task Newton could have been given.

"Miss Bethann, she send me up to he'p you, Mist' Luther," Newton said politely.

"Okay, Newton," Luther said softly. "Thanks. Just put the big canvas bag on the back seat and the leather one on the floor. I'll arrange it the way I want when I get out there."

"Yessuh," Newton said and went out toward the back of the house.

Luther went upstairs to get his jacket, felt the inside pocket for the manila envelope to go to Bledso and the second envelope with the cash and cashier's check inside. Both were intact. He took one last, unsentimental look around the sterile bachelor chamber he had occupied since that night following his "marriage" to Bethann, lit a cigarette and went out, the jacket draped by one finger over

his shoulder. As with his office at the bank, nothing of sentimental value remained. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he turned toward the study and went inside.

The phone rang some five or six times before he hung up, waited impatiently the time it took him to finish smoking a cigarette before he dialed the number again. His fingers drummed on the desk nervously, wondering if this could be another unexpected hitch in his timetable. He began to sweat with apprehension. He picked up the receiver and dialed the number again and heard the buzz another five or six times; and then he heard Ruth-Rachel's voice answering.

"Where've you been?" he asked sharply through his relief

"In my room. You know she's been getting to the phone before me. I waited to see where she was before I answered, else she'd listen at her door."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. Out, maybe. Or still sleeping one off from last night. Where were you? I could've got out easy last night."

"I was tied up getting some important things finished up."

"Where are you calling from? Am I going to get to see you today, Luther?"

He laughed happily. "You sure are, baby. I'm calling from the Hall. Listen, honey, how long will it take you to pack?"

"Pack? Pack what?"

"Everything you'd want to take with you if you were leaving for good."

He heard her gasp of surprise, then, "Luther! Oh, *Luther!* You mean it? You really mean we're *leaving?*"

"I mean it, honey, I sure do. Just as soon as you can get yourself packed up."

"Oh, *Luther! Luther!*" she cried.

"Well, how long you goin' a stand there 'Luther-ing'? How long will it take you?"

"Any time you get here. Any time. I'll go buck naked if I'm not dressed and packed time you get here."

"It won't be that fast, so you can take a little time. I got to stop by and see Carrie and say good-by to her first. You be waiting on the front porch for me. Maybe in an hour. No more'n that. Maybe a little less, even."

"I'll be ready and waiting, Luther. Make it soon as you can." Then with a sudden burst of curiosity that overwhelmed her, "Whatever in the world's *happened*, Luther?" she asked.

"I'll tell you later. I'll have a whole lot of time to tell you about everything. All the time in the world." He laughed happily. "I found me a gold mine."

Carrie was alone in the house when he got there. He had already stopped thinking of it as the "Dorman place" or as "Carrie's." It was the "Archer place" in his mind now. It might just as well be the Archer place, he thought as he took in the freshly painted house, new curtains hanging at the windows, the heavy, dark draperies gone, the deep, turkey-red floral designs in the upholstery and wallpaper replaced by more modern, lighter-toned, and gaily patterned materials and paper. It all added such a brighter, gayer, and happier appearance that made it almost totally strange to him now.

He had come in by the front door, noting that the station wagon was gone, that Carrie's smaller car stood in the lane. He heard her call out, "Who's there?" as he went down the hallway toward the kitchen, answering, "It's only me, Carrie."

"Luther," she greeted when he came into the kitchen where she sat at the table with a cup of coffee before her, "what are you doing here this time of morning? How about some fresh, just-made coffee?"

"No, thanks, Carrie. I had some at the Hall. I—I just dropped by for a little talk."

"Well, sit down while I finish mine. I'm hardly awake. I had to get the girls ready to go into town with Fred. He takes them in with him to the store every Saturday morning and they play there until I come in during the afternoon and pick them up."

"Carrie," Luther said abruptly, "it's all over between me and Miss Bethann. I'm pulling out of Regis sometime this morning. I got all my things in the car. In about a half hour I'll be starting for Reno. Six weeks there and I'll be a divorced man."

Carrie looked at him sadly, tears welling into her eyes as she shook her head slowly from side to side. "You—you'll come back to Regis when—when it's over, Luther?" she asked with quiet resignation.

"Sure. Sure I will, honey." He said it quickly, perhaps too quickly, having seen the dismay on her face. He wished he could be telling the truth as he uttered the lie, knowing he had no intention of returning here for a long time. If ever. He saw Carrie's strained

look and said easily, "I'm coming back and I might even go into politics. Maybe Mr. Marcus might even back me for some office now that he won't be my father-in-law any more. And if he don't, I don't know why I couldn't just file for an office I want and go out campaigning for myself. Lots of folks will still remember Sergeant Luther Dorman and vote for me. How about that, Carrie? You think you'd like to be sister to an Assemblyman or State Senator or something like that?"

His light tone did not fool Carrie, she who had known him since the day he was born in this very house. "Luther," she said with some despair in her voice, "don't talk like that. You don't sound like Luther Dorman when you're talking so big and uppity, like some—like some—I don't even know what. Like you were trying to get even with somebody. You just remember that what happened between you and Miss Bethann and Mr. Marcus, that wasn't any of their doing, so there's no use faulting them for it. You come back here and settle down, you could find yourself a nice, respectable girl to marry. You could get yourself a good job just as easy as you could go running around the county asking people to vote for you when you don't know the first thing about being an Assemblyman or a State Senator. You got no training for anything like that. Maybe Fred could help you. You got us the \$5000 to help buy the business, didn't you? You could come back and go in as Fred's partner after you learned a little about—"

"I like Fred a lot, Carrie," Luther interposed, "but I was never cut out to be a store man. Anyway, what's the use of talking about it now? Let's wait till it's all over and I come back. We'll have that and lots more to talk about then."

Carrie sat silently, uneasily, staring at her brother, unable to pick out just what it was about his present attitude, this too-glib manner of speech, that did not ring true. She hated anything about him that was boastful, just as she had hated this very same fault in her father when he had been drinking, boasting of his prowess, telling her mother what a big man he could have been if he hadn't been saddled with a wife and children, later interchanging this line with his excuse of having fallen off the Radford roof and become a "cripple"—although he never seemed crippled when he wanted to do the things he liked doing. She looked at Luther and wondered if she were not seeing into the future, hearing another Jud Dorman, boastful, drunk, a mental cripple.

Luther reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out the packet of fifty-dollar bills. Casually, he tossed it on the table be-

tween them and said, "Here, Carrie, you put this away in some safe place to use when you need it. Maybe for the girls' education or whatever. Don't let anybody know you got it and you'll be able to hang onto it longer that way."

Carrie moved backward from it. "I don't need all that money, Luther. I don't need anything that Fred can't give me now. If you're going to be away for two months, you'll be more likely to need it than me."

Luther smiled. "Go ahead and take it. I got more than that. Lots more. Don't you ever worry about Luther not having enough money again. No, not ever again, Carrie. Look."

He let the money lay on the table, then pulled out his wallet and took the cashier's check out, unfolded it, and held it up before her startled eyes. "You see that, Carrie? That's a cashier's check for \$25,000. Just like cash. Marcus Radford's lawyer gave it to me yesterday. He bought me off with it so I'd give Miss Bethann a divorce without making a fuss over Harriet. Also, he's paying all the legal fees and gave me some cash for my expenses for the next two months. And the car. So you got no cause to worry about me from now on. I'm set."

Still Carrie sat and stared at him. The packet of \$5000 lay between them, the brown band reading clearly: 100—\$50—100. And beneath that: \$5000. She made no move to touch it. And now an awkward silence hung between them. Luther got up and walked around the table to where she sat, wanting to hasten to his rendezvous with Ruth-Rachel, yet unwilling to leave her here in this dark, sad mood.

"I got to go now, Carrie," he said. "I'll be back in about eight or ten weeks. A week to drive there, six weeks there, maybe a week or ten days to see San Francisco and Los Angeles. I'll drop you a line once in a while to let you know where we—I am and how things are going along."

"I wish you would, Luther." She stood up to face him, solemn, concerned. "You sure you'll be all right?"

He laughed. "I'll be fine, Carrie. Just remember, I went through a whole lot worse than this and for a lot longer, during the war." He looked around with an air of finality. "You take care of yourself, honey. Tell Fred and the girls good-by for me and I'll see you all in—well, as soon as I get back."

He kissed her hard, gave her a tight embrace, and walked out to the car. As he got in, he remembered the envelope to Bledso he must not fail to drop into a mailbox before leaving Regis. He took it out of his inside jacket pocket and placed it on the seat next to

him so he wouldn't overlook it, this last and monumental gesture of defiance to Marcus Radford. Again he felt a warm glow at the thought that he, Luther Dorman, would be the one to pull Marcus Radford's claws, thus making a playful—and caged?—kitten out of the once powerful and roaring lion.

On the road toward the Hagen house, he was already making additional plans. First, they would drive to New Orleans and spend a few days there. He would pick out a good bank on Monday morning and open a checking account with the cashier's check. Then he would rent a safety deposit box, one large enough to hold the rest of his cash. During the next few days there, he would carry as much of the money as he could put into his pockets in wrapped packages, store it in the metal repository until every dollar of it was within the safety of that bank. Then, by God, they would be set! He would garage the Cadillac in New Orleans, and they would fly out to Reno, getting there well before his estimated arrival date by car. He would buy a new car in Reno, use it during the six weeks they would be there. They would be married in Reno, then drive to San Francisco and Los Angeles, sell the car when they were ready to fly back to New Orleans to rest and make arrangements for a long leisurely cruise somewhere. The bulk of the cash would be safe in New Orleans and he would still have most of the \$25,000 in his checking account.

He breathed easier now, approaching the turnoff lane to Lutie's house, looking ahead for the first sight of Ruth-Rachel's happy, beaming face. The nights they would share together would make the waiting all the more worthwhile. He remembered back to the night he had seen her after his return to Regis, when she had whispered to him, "*You won't be sorry, Luther.*"

He smiled exultantly with the remembering. No, he hadn't been one bit sorry. Not even a single, little bit!

5.

Ruth-Rachel wasn't standing on the front porch waiting patiently as he had expected to find her. He felt a momentary annoyance, then laughed lightly. *Women!* he said scornfully to himself. *Got no idea how long a minute is or how short an hour can be!* He pulled up into the driveway, made a half turn, backed up and headed the nose of the Cadillac out toward the highway so they could get out with the least difficulty once she was in the car. Two quick stops, he was planning his timetable again. Drop the envelope in the mailbox, stop for gas and an oil check, then nothing but open road between them and New Orleans!

Impatience began to grip him, an urgency to be away from Regis and on the road, to get the familiar behind him so that only the new and fresh and adventurous would lie ahead for himself and Ruth-Rachel. Now he would have her all to himself, to hold, keep, possess. No more looking over his shoulder in fear of being found out; they would be together—together in triumph—a woman who would look up to him for what he was: a man with an important name; with the money to back that name up; and one day, maybe, in an important political office in his state.

He sat for a few moments in silence, hoping Ruth-Rachel would come out and signal him to come get her baggage and take it out to the car. But he saw nothing, heard no movement. He got out of the car, sliding across the seat to be nearer to the porch, leaving the door open so that he would not have to slam it shut. He did not see the manila envelope as he brushed it across the seat, nor as it fell from the car to the ground beside the car.

He went up on the front porch, stepping lightly, unwilling to chance a sudden, explosive scene with Lutie, who, once roused by the knowledge that Ruth-Rachel was escaping her and thus would be forever out of her reach, would undoubtedly turn this beautiful, wonderful day into a nightmare, shouting her homemade Biblical quotations and homicidal imprecations at them both. The screen door was unlocked. He pushed against the inner door and it swung inward easily. He stepped inside the house, listened, heard no sound of voice or movement.

Strange, he speculated as he walked slowly, treading lightly, down the hallway toward Ruth-Rachel's room. He put his hand on the knob, saw that the door was slightly ajar, pushed it open a mere crack, and looked inside.

Ruth-Rachel lay upon the bed, dress and undergarments ripped and torn, hanging from her in long shreds as though some wild, enraged animal had been at her. She lay face down, almost entirely naked, seemingly asleep, one arm flung out, the other folded under her, knees drawn up slightly. He pushed the door in and leaped across the room, covering the six or eight feet between them in two quick jumps. He turned her over, face upward, and saw that she was unconscious—and why. There was a deep gash in her forehead that ran back, red and angry, under her blonde hair. Blood streaked her face. Her breasts and sides and thighs, her belly and legs showed massive purpled bruises. Then he saw the bloodied iron stove poker on the floor beside the bed. Rage flooded him as he put a hand on her shoulder as though to awaken her; and he saw her

face again and began to cry at the ghastly sight of the nose and mouth that had been crushed and battered into a shapeless, hardly recognizable mass of pulp by the poker. He bent down and picked up the heavy iron weapon, his hand curling around its handle tightly. "Goddamn her," he said half to himself and half aloud to Ruth-Rachel, "I'll find that crazy witch and bend this poker around her ugly skull. I'll kill—"

He turned quickly to go in search of Lutie, then stepped back with the remaining words choked off abruptly in his throat.

He saw her. Lutie Hagen. She was standing against the wall, facing him like a wild, crazed, cornered animal, trapped and with her teeth bared insanely in a silent snarl. She had been hidden behind the door when he pushed his way in, had watched him silently all the time, had in fact been waiting for him.

He advanced upon her slowly, started to raise the poker. She threw out one arm and the door slammed shut and she stood against the wall and now he could see the shotgun as she brought it up from beside her skirt and pointed it at him, her face contorted with inhuman rage. He recognized the old, double-barreled .12-gauge Davies that had belonged to Dale. He had seen it a number of times in Dale's own hands out in the woods when they had hunted together.

"Put it down, Lutie," he said coldly.

"You stay back, you Cain, you Judas who betrayed my son," she snarled.

"Lutie, put it down, I tell you!"

"Stay back, Luther Dorman. You betrayed my son with his whore-wife."

"Lutie, I didn't betray Dale. I swear I didn't!"

"You did. Don't lie to me, Luther Dorman. I heard her talkin' to you on the phone this morning. 'We're leavin'?' " she mimicked in a simpering tone. " 'I'll go buck naked if I ain't dressed when you get here.' Well, you're here now, Mister Luther Dorman. You goin' a tell me you didn't come here to betray the memory of my son, the way you been doin' time after time since you come home? Are you?"

"Lutie, *listen—*"

"No, I won't listen to you no more. I listened once and I believed the words you said were my Dale's, that he loved me more'n he did her. I believed you and then you come creeping back to my house to befoul it with her, that no-good piece of trashy baggage. You took her and betrayed my son. He was a *giant*, my Dale, and you and her made him into a—nothin'!—a handful of ashes and dust!"

"I didn't betray him, Lutie. Dale's been dead all this time. God-damn it, you can't betray a dead man! He's dead! That's all there is to a man after he's dead! Ashes and dust! He's had it! Nobody can betray him after that!"

Her sepulchral voice intoned the words. "He died a stranger in a strange land and lay rotting even while you disported with his wife. You, his friend! You who were with him and could have saved him. But no, Luther Dorman, not you. You let him die. And why? Because you hungered for his whore-wife."

"Lutie," Luther cried out in desperation. "I tell you I *didn't*! It was too late—*too late!*—he was dead when I got to him! I—*couldn't save—him!* For *Christ's* sake, believe me!"

Lutie looked at him and he cringed under the withering scorn he saw in her eyes, the hatred that boiled over in her. "Thy shame is great," she droned on almost tonelessly, "and thy guilt greater. I will put the mark of Cain on you with this—" she motioned with the shotgun and Luther heard the distinct click of the hammers being drawn back. One touch on the triggers and his every empirical dream would be obliterated. He thought of Ruth-Rachel lying behind him on the bed, his plans for the future—*his timetable!*—the fortune in cash that lay locked in the trunk of the car no more than fifty or sixty yards from this very room.

"Lutie, *please! Listen to me!* I didn't do Dale any harm. I'll do anything you say, go away right now. I'll never see Ruth-Rachel again as long as I live and I'll pay you— *Lutie! I'm a rich man!* I'll give you enough money to last you out your lifetime. It's right here with me in the trunk of the car. Come outside with me and I'll show it to you. More money than you ever seen. Lutie, *please*, for *God's* sake, please let me—"

The gleam in Lutie's eyes sharpened. "You offer me the thirty pieces of silver you took to betray my Dale, you Judas? You who have sinned with his wicked wife? You ask me to let her, the evil one, live with you in shame and sin while my Dale, my precious son, lies buried in a strange land among pagans and heathens? No, no! She will live on and men will look on her hideous face and turn away sick with disgust. But you, Judas, will die as you let my son die. You—"

The barrels of the gun wavered. Luther thought he saw his chance and leaped toward her, iron poker extended in his right hand to strike the gun to one side.

The first charge hit him in the exact center of his chest, throwing him backward against the foot of the iron bed, almost over it. His

body jerked upward and back as if in surprise, then fell forward into a bent-knee, stooped position, one arm dangling loosely over the top of the low iron bedframe.

"Carriel" he gasped.

He hung there desperately for a moment and then the second charge caught him full in the neck and face. His clawlike fingers grasped at the wound as he fell forward to the floor on his face.

The last word he gasped out was the same as the one before.

"Carriel"

Then he died.

The shotgun fell from Lutie's hands and she turned and walked out of the room into her own, her eyes no more than gleaming pin-points of fire. From a table she lifted the silver frame that held a photograph of Dale, one he sent her from the first camp in which he had served, standing proudly erect in his uniform, young, tall, handsome, so much her son. Pinned through the lacy filigree of the frame was the Silver Star medal that had been awarded him posthumously.

Lutie clutched the picture to her thin, shrunken breast, crying out as she sank to the floor on her knees, *"Forgive me, Father, for taking into my own hands the vengeance that is Thine alone."*

6.

Chris Jackson, a Negro working in a nearby field, heard the shotgun blasts and looked around him nervously. Almost any kind of a shot would make a colored man nervous these days, what with the Loomis thing, with white deputies and Old Hogsnot rooting around all over Buckeytown, eying every Negro on this side of County Road as well with suspicion. The sound had come from behind him; and behind him was only the Hagen cottage. He worked on slowly, wondering if a colored man should meddle in white folks' business, willing himself to ignore the two rapid explosions. Still, it sounded mightily as though the shots had come from *inside* the house and he knew that only the two women lived there. that crazy old Miz Lutie and her pretty blonde daughter-in-law that he'd heard was chasing around with Miss Bethann Radford's husband, that Sergeant Luther Dorman, the hero boy who before the war, he suspected, had been fooling around with his Cressie.

Jackson tried to go back to his hoeing and dismiss from his mind what he had heard, but the eerie stillness that followed the two blasts niggled at him, prodded him into action. He put the hoe over his shoulder and walked to the Hagen house, approaching it from

the front where the big Cadillac stood in front of the porch. He would knock on the door and when someone answered—

The front door was still ajar when he went up the steps. He called, "Miz Hagen! You Miz Hagen! Anything wrong in heah, Miz Hagen?"

There was no answer. He wiped his feet carefully on the cocoa mat and walked inside, remembering to remove his hat as he did so, wondering if he shouldn't have gone around to the back door. He was inside now and it was too late to do otherwise. He looked into both front rooms, sniffed at the foul air, smelled the spent gunpowder, and followed it like a trail down the hallway. A bedroom door on the left side was open and he looked in cautiously, almost fearfully, unwilling to be found in a situation like this, where a white woman might begin screaming and later identify him as a Peeping Tom or an intruder for a more vile purpose.

He saw the young white woman lying on the bed, almost entirely naked, bruised breasts exposed, her face and head brutally smashed and the blood oozing slowly from the gashes in her head. Then he saw that what he had first supposed was a tangled heap of bedclothes on the floor at the foot of the bed was a dead white man. Shocked and wide-eyed with horror, he backed out into the hallway; and then he heard the whining, mewling sobs of the old woman, that crazy old Miz Hagen, coming from another room on the opposite side of the hall.

His first impulse was to run out of this house as fast as his legs would carry him and this he was about to do, but then he saw the telephone on the table in the hallway. As though it had willed him to do so, he picked it up and almost automatically dialed the letter "O," and when the operator answered, said shakily, "Ma'am, you—you-all bettuh send a amb-lance out here to Miz Hagen's place on County Road, an'—an' you bettuh send a doctuh out, too." He paused to catch his breath, then added, "An' maybe you best call the sheriff, too, ma'am. It look mighty bad out heah to Miz Hagen's." Then he replaced the receiver slowly and went out to the front porch where he sat, hat in hand, on the top step to await the first arrival.

The ambulance came first, bringing a young doctor who went directly to the bedroom where he took one brief look at the man on the floor, shook his head at the attendant with him, then to the woman who lay on the bed. As he searched through his bag for a syringe kit, he said to the attendant, "Mac, get the stretcher in here. Fast. We might be able to save this one if we can get her to the hospital in time."

Jackson went with him to help. By the time they returned, she

was ready to be moved. The doctor and attendant covered her with the hospital blanket and placed her on the stretcher, and the two men carried her outside. As they came down the steps, the men from the sheriff's office arrived. The doctor explained what he had found while Chris Jackson helped the attendant lift Ruth-Rachel into the ambulance. The deputy in charge nodded and gave them permission to leave. While the doctor raced for the rear entrance to the ambulance, the driver ran around to the left side and, as he started to get in behind the wheel, saw the stamped manila envelope lying on the ground between the Cadillac and the ambulance. Instinctively, he bent over and picked it up, put it on the seat beside him. As he got in and closed the door, he heard the doctor call from the inside, "Step on it, Mac. Fast and wide open all the way." Mac, who loved to drive his ambulance in just that manner, did exactly as ordered.

At the hospital the wailing siren had already signaled another attendant to the emergency receiving platform at the rear door. Together, he and Mac carried Ruth-Rachel out on the stretcher and placed her on another one with wheels, rolled it along to the elevator while the doctor raced to the nearest telephone to alert the resident surgeon. Then the elevator arrived and a surgical nurse in green cap and gown came off and helped the two attendants and the doctor roll the stretcher inside.

In another ten minutes Mac and the other attendant returned to the first floor and went out back to where the ambulance was parked at the emergency receiving entrance. Mac lit a cigarette and got back into the ambulance to move it to its regular parking place and thus clear the entrance for another possible emergency arrival. Parked, he got out of the long, sleek vehicle, and it was then that he noticed the manila envelope on the seat, examined it with mild curiosity. It was addressed and already stamped. He noticed that it carried no return address, only two initials in the upper righthand corner, L.D. He took it with him as he went back to the platform where the other attendant stood smoking a cigarette.

Mac said, "Somebody sure had a mean hate on for that gal, the way they bent that poker over her face. I don't know what she looked like before, but she'll sure by God never look the same again. The guy, he was gone by the time we got there, torn all to hell with two blasts from that shotgun. When the sheriff's boys are done lookin' him over, I guess we'll get the call to go back out there and bring him in. And you ought to of seen the creepy lookin' old coot out there in the hall. . . ."

A bell tolled dully and a red light flashed beside them. The other attendant stepped on his cigarette. "Got to go, buddy. Duty calls."

"Yeah," Mac replied, "don't it?"

The two went inside together, the attendant to answer his call bell and Mac to check in at the main desk and await his next emergency call. He stood eying the pretty nurse on duty with a practiced look of appreciation, then saw the postman coming along the hallway to collect the outgoing mail from the box between the elevator doors.

"Here, Bill," Mac said, "here's another one for you. Some guy dropped it and I picked it up. Guess he'll be mighty worried about it until he knows it got there all right."

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B.S. CHIMNI

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